SIX COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

AUG.

15¢

# STAR WESTERN

BIGGER ... OF THE WEST!

THE BORDER-HOPPER GETS TOUGH!
by WALT COBURN

HORSE GREER BETS ON SIXES!
by HARRY F. OLMSTED

OBETS CHESHIRE OVERHOLSER
AND OTHERS!

6 COMPLETE NOVELS

AUG. 1946

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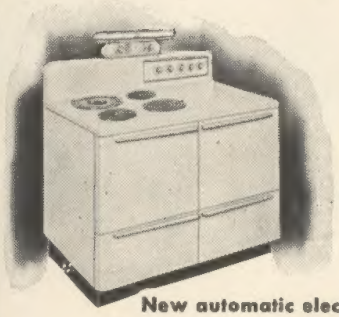

New automatic electric range

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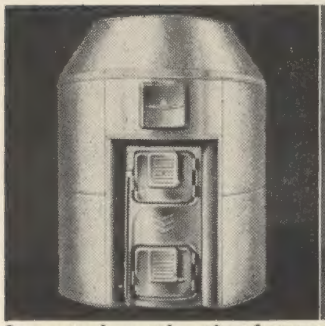
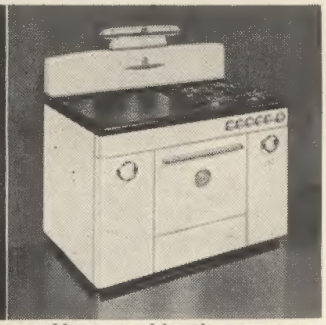
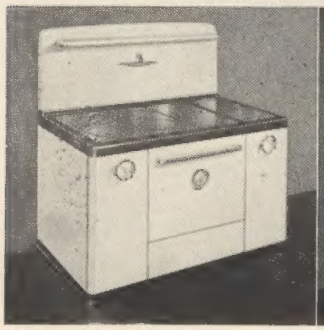


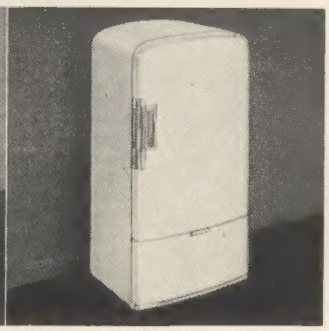
Supersteel round casing furnace



New combination range



New coal and wood range



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BIG TONY DON'T LIKE TO LOSE $5000 AT DICE, GRAY. I'M HERE TO GET IT BACK

I-I-T'S NOT HERE

JG

SO-O-O. THE DOUGH'S IN YOUR HOTEL ROOM, HUH? THEN SEND YOUR PAL HERE... AND HE'S GOT JUST 10 MINUTES OR ELSE...

I'LL GO, SON

MY SON GAMBLING WITH THUGS! THIS COULD MAKE A NASTY SCANDAL

IT WORKED! IT WORKED! AND HE SAID MY ACTING WOULDN'T FOOL A CHILD!

COME ON, NOW! A QUICK CHANGE AND A SHAVE BEFORE HE GETS BACK!

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THIN GILLETTES REALLY RATE. THEY'RE MIGHTY KEEN AND LAST A LONG TIME

HERE'S THE MON-- WHY, WHERE'S THAT THUG?

RIGHT HERE, DAD. THE MAN YOU SAID COULDN'T ACT—LARRY PHELPS!

HE'S HANDSOME

TO THE NEW STAR OF "LITTLE AUGIE, GANGSTER"

...AND HIS LEADING LADY!

WHAT A GIRL!

A THIN GILLETTE SHAVE ALWAYS MAKES A HIT

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SIX SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE

# STAR WESTERN

## BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME THIRTY-NINE AUGUST, 1946 NUMBER THREE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Six Complete Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**THE BORDER-HOPPER GETS TOUGH!**.....*WALT COBURN* 10
When Big Sam vowed he'd never pay a wooden peso for Jim Olcott, that back-to-the-wall ramrod figured he'd get his own ransom—at the Bank of Boothill!

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**BOOTS AND SADDLES FOR THE BOOTHILL BUCCANEERS**.....*TOM W. BLACKBURN* 42
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Hoss Greer plays his last hole-card against a red-handed murder syndicate!

★ ★ ★ Star Features ★ ★ ★

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Where friends of the friendly West swap salty trail talk.

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SEPTEMBER ISSUE OUT AUGUST 9th!

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# ★ The Branding Corral ★

## Conducted by Strawboss

IN APRIL'S *Branding Corral,* Jim Saddler, of Nebraska, wanted to know why old-time cowpunchers and lawmen always wore their revolvers on the right hip, butt pointing backward, whereas Army men invariably packed theirs on the left side, with the butt pointing forward. We allowed, at that time, that mebbeso some of the *Branding Corral* gang could set Jim straight, and sure enough, this month's mail pouch sheds some plumb interesting light on the subject from J. B. Huddleston, of the Swinging H Ranch, Zavalla, Texas, and B. King, of 1445-B Twenty-Sixth Street, Santa Monica, California.

So step up to the old corral gate, you grub-liners, for a cup of Arbuckle and some good salty talk by Brother Huddleston, a product of the Big Bend country, who once used his guns to bring law and order to the famous Lone Star State.

Dear Strawboss:

Jim Saddler, of the Cornhusker State, wants to know about how us old gun-slingers used our guns for the quickest draw. We didn't wear our sixguns on our hips, as he seems to think. Our guns were in drop holsters on the side of our leg, so that the pistol handle was only about six inches above full arm length.

That way, when you raised your hand from the side, the pistol came with it. And with the pistol in that position, the holster came far enough down to allow for the tie-down string around our leg.

Soldiers' guns with the butts forward on the left side is for a cross draw, and is very fast when practiced.

We sometimes used two .45 Colts waist-high, with butts forward, for cross-drawing in fast shooting. In our expert shooting, we never looked at our gun, but at the thing we were shooting at, and often we even had the sights filed off for smoother drawing from the holster.

The man who carries his gun on his hip could be filled with lead before the gun could clear leather!

I was born and raised in the Big Bend country on the Rio Grande in Texas, and used my guns for many years in hard fighting to make Texas a safe and pleasant State for people to live in and raise their families.

I will be glad to answer any letters on this subject from *Branding Corral* readers, if you would like to forward any further inquiries to me.

This letter is in answer to the one from Jim Saddler in *Star Western* for April, 1946.

Thanks a lot, J. B., for a mighty fine and informative letter, and now we'll open up the old gate for Friend King, who also hankers to have his say in this Colt controversy Jim Saddler stirred up.

Dear Strawboss:

Reading April *Star Western,* I came upon Jim Saddler's inquiry about "short-arms." I think he is assuming a little too much when he says that Army men invariably wore their guns on their left side, etc. The enlisted man wore his gun on his right hip, a little to the front. It was adjusted so you could slide it anywhere you wanted to on the belt. You could wear it on your web belt if you liked, and in the field you *had* to wear it on your web belt.

The cartridge apron was on the right side, in front of the hip; the left had reins, if you were in the cavalry, and your sabre was tucked under your left leg—a damned nuisance which was done away with after the Seventies. With all this truck to carry around, the revolver was made so that it could be readily shifted for comfort.

How you actually wore your revolver depended on your commanding officer. In a small post, the C.O. was king of all he surveyed. What he said went as regulations. If he wanted the Sergeant of the guard to wear a revolver, the Sergeant wore a revolver.

There were six revolvers to a company (post duty), and generally infantry guards did not wear them. Incidentally, the bayonet was carried on the left side attached to the belt; the cavalry did not carry a bayonet.

A friend of mine—a sergeant in the Army—got a whale of a bang out of a piece in one of your magazines on the J-C war. The author mentions "three divisions;" as a matter of fact, it was three companies, and since not even these were recruited to full strength, it fell short of being a division, to say nothing of "three divisions!"

*Needling—Western Style*

How common were the so-called "needle

*(Please turn to page 8)*

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*(Continued from page 6)*

guns" in the frontier days of the West? Arthur Rowan, a citizen of the great State of Idaho, asks the question, and maybe some reader can oblige.

Dear Strawboss:

I am very much interested in early Western firearms, and wondered if any of the Branding Corral gang could advise me the earliest date at which the so-called "needle gun" came into active use.

The needle gun, as I understand it, was a muzzle loader which used a regular musket cap. The paper-wrapped cartridge was supposed to have been charged with powder and ball, and a needle in the breech of the gun punctured the paper cartridge when it was driven home by the ramrod. This permitted the powder to break into the nipple so that the cap would set it on fire and discharge the gun.

I understand this type of cartridge could be used in any musket, but if the gun was without a needle you had to tear the cartridge with your teeth so the powder could spill out. Otherwise, the cap could not discharge it.

A needle gun, they say, could be loaded much more rapidly than the old-style powder-and-ball musket. I suppose it went out when the Winchester arrived with its brass shell.

*Bull And Bear Fights*

Forty-niners had little time for sports, but when they did go in for them, they were usually of a rough and often brutal variety, according to Anton Dzubian, California rancher. A favorite amusement of the hardy miners of the period, Dzubian says, was the bull and bear fight, which he here interestingly describes.

Dear Strawboss:

I wonder how many old-time Californians living today can remember the thrilling, but usually brutal and bloody bull-and-bear fights with which the '49ers helped relieve the tedium of their daily grind in the diggings.

Usually these fights were tremendous events, and miners would come from far and wide to witness one. An old-time notice advertised one of these spectacles as follows:

WAR! WAR! WAR!

The celebrated Bull-killing Bear,
GENERAL SCOTT,
will fight a bull on Sunday the 15th inst,
at 2 p. m., at Moquelumne Hill.

The bear will be chained with a 20-foot chain in the middle of the arena. The bull will be perfectly wild, young, of the Spanish breed, and the best that can be found in the country. The bull's horns will be of their natural length, and *'not sawed off to prevent accidents.'* The bull will be quite free in the arena, and will not be hampered in any way whatever.

Prior to the fight, the gay and colorful crowd was entertained by a pair of fiddlers; then a last tattoo was beaten on a gong to hurry stragglers to the scene of the carnage. When "General Scott" was dragged out of his cage, twelve-hundred pounds of fighting bear, he immediately began to rip at the earth with his huge foreclaws.

Then the bull was goaded out of his pen and made a furious dash at the red flag being waved to swing him into action.

The bull, a handsome fellow of dark purple color marked with white, glared steadily at the bear for a few minutes, then at last making up his mind, suddenly charged it. The "General" received him at a low crouch, and then, before the bull could retreat, seized it by the nose. The fight now began in earnest, with the bear, on its back, holding the bull's snout firmly in its giant teeth, while it embraced him, the meanwhile, around the neck with its shaggy forepaws. The bull answered this assault by stomping the bear with its hind feet.

After another round when it became pretty plain that the "winnah and new cham-peen" was General Scott, the promoter of the fight announced that, since there was not a bull in "the hull of Californy" that the General could not lick, he would, for two hundred dollars, admit another bull to the arena, and the three could fight it out till one or all were killed.

Two or three men passing the hat quickly collected the required amount in gold dust and to the roars of the crowd the contest went on. After another round or two with the fresh bull reinforcing his companion in misery the fight was called off when it became apparent that not even two bulls could cope successfully with old "General Scott."

The two bulls had to be shot, at the conclusion of the festivities.

However, not always was the bear the winner in these contests. Sometimes the bull would make a mad rush and kill the bear by plunging his horns between the ribs, striking a vital part. In fact, such was the fate of General Scott.

Well, see you folks next month.

—STRAWBOSS.

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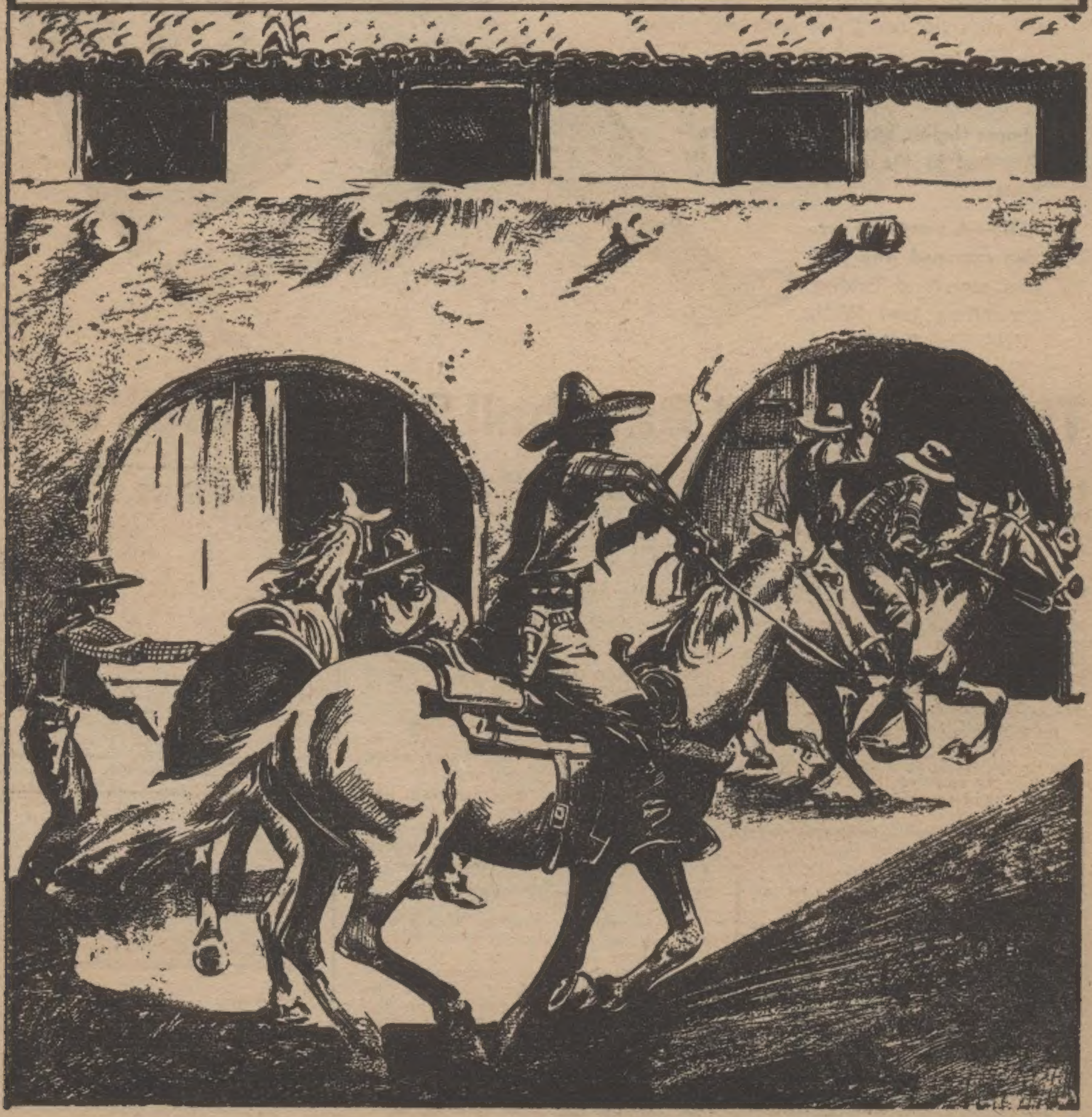
# The BORDER-HOPPER

**When they demanded $40,000 for Jim Olcott, Big Sam swore that he'd never pay a wooden peso for his reckless ramrod. . . . Jim figured, then, that he had to raise quick ransom from the Bank of Boothill—by cashing in his renegade captors who rode with Lobo Jones, red-handed terror-boss of the Brimstone Border!**



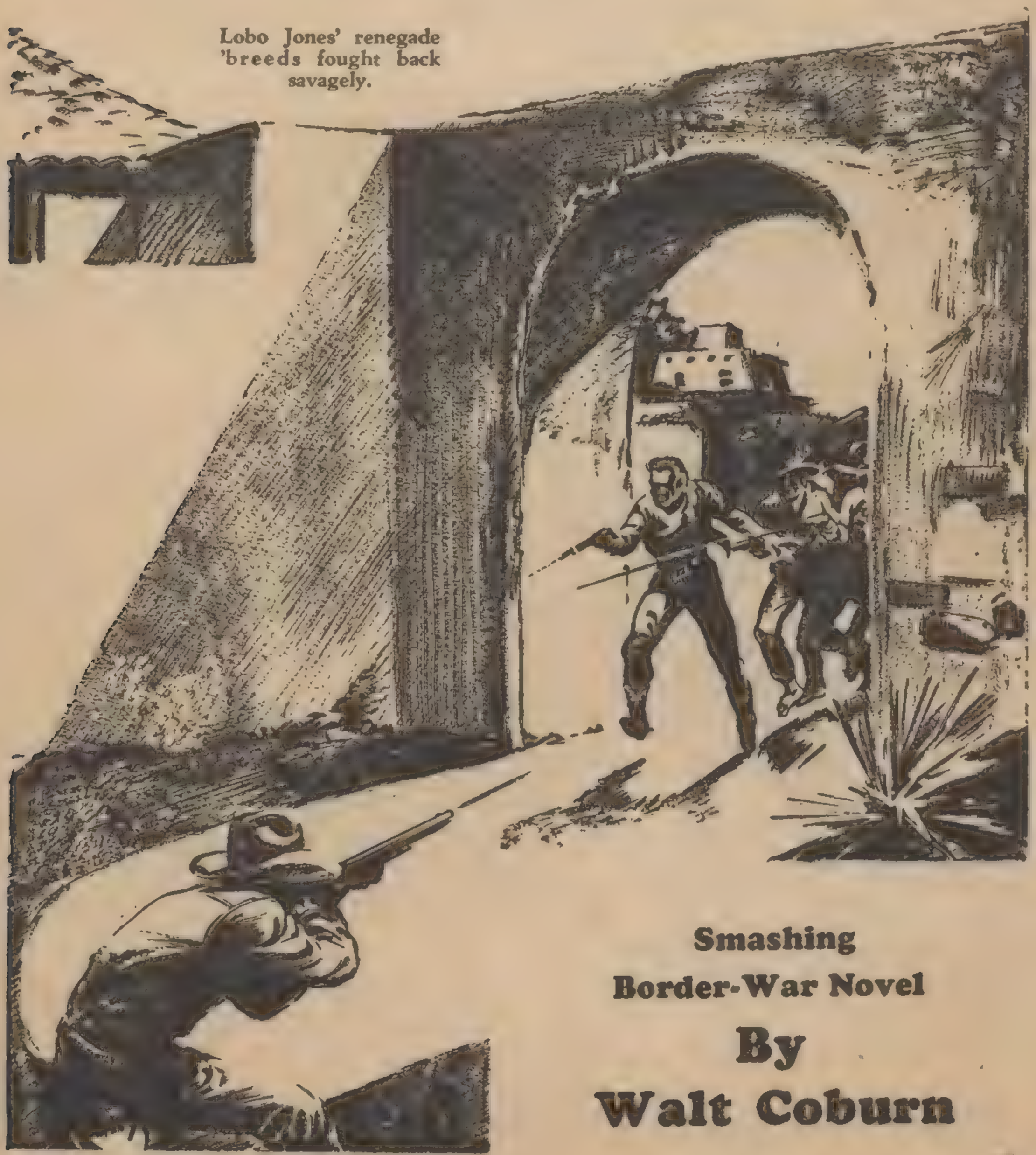
# GETS TOUGH!

## CHAPTER ONE

### Viva El Lobo!

THE way Sam Pringle told it, a man couldn't lose. And Pringle had been along the Mexican Border long enough to know what he was talking about. . . . . Before Sam Pringle had quit the strenuous life of an Arizona cattle rancher to run his Border Club and count his profits from a saloon and gambling games, he had been a top cowhand. And he also had done his share of smuggling Chinese and running guns. So Sam Pringle savvied whereof he spoke when he laid his proposition on the line for Jim Olcott.

"The Rebel army has gone through Sonora



Lobo Jones' renegade 'breeds fought back savagely.

**Smashing Border-War Novel**

**By Walt Coburn**

and on through to Chihuahua like a swarm of locusts," said Sam Pringle. "They've killed off some of the Federalists and 'dobe-walled the Generals and politicos as was loyal to Diaz and his government. And most of the Federal 'dobe soldiers has joined the Rebels and marched on to Juarez singin' the Cucaracha and hollerin' 'Viva Villa!', leavin' Sonora behind to the mercy of the border wolves. And also to the gringos with the brains and guts to ride down there and round up all the cattle they kin gather and trail out. What's more, there's plenty of cattle left there on the big Santa Margarita Grant."

"The Santa Margarita ranch. . . . ." Big, tow-headed Jim Olcott grinned flatly and his cold blue eyes narrowed a little, crinkling deep lines in his weathered skin. "Old Don Estaban and all his del Castillo descendants would rise from their graves to cut down any gringos that rode uninvited across the Santa Margarita. Hire yourself a new ramrod, Pringle."

"Since when did you git spooky, Olcott?" Big, paunchy Sam Pringle had stared with pale, cold-gray eyes across the bar at Jim Olcott. "When did dead men commence botherin' you? Now lemme do the talkin'—and you listen."

"Go ahead, Sam."

"The rebels killed off every del Castillo there was left to ever lay claim to the Santa Margarita, so that the title would be clean as a sponged slate and so the Santa Margarita Grant could be handed over to whoever Madero wants to hand it to when Pancho Villa puts Madero in the Presidente's chair at Chapultepec. You know who is most likely to fall heir to the Santa Margarita, Olcott?"

Jim Olcott's blue eyes remained bleak. "You said you'd do the talkin', Pringle."

"The Santa Margarita," said Pringle, filling two shot glasses with the best whiskey he kept in his private stock, "will go to Lobo Jones. Because Lobo Jones furnished the bulk of the guns and ammunition that armed the Sonoran rebels. And the rebel cavalry was afoot until Lobo Jones mounted 'em on horses he stole from the cow outfits on this side of the border."

"That gringo cabron! I'm your huckleberry, Pringle."

"So I figured, Olcott."

Their eyes met and held as they lifted their filled glasses and drank to seal the deal.

Now Jim Olcott was more than a hundred miles below the Mexican border rounding up cattle on the Santa Margarita range, ramrodding a hard-bitten crew of border renegades that had been hand-picked by Sam Pringle and turned over to him to handle. They were well-armed and mounted on the best cow horses that ever made up any remuda. Even their pack mules were tops. They drew fighting pay and there wasn't a man in the outfit who hadn't heard the owl hoot along the outlaw trail.

Jim Olcott had to be tough as a boot to ramrod that outfit. He knew it. And they knew it. If ever he showed a sign of weakening, they'd hamstring him like a wolf pack pulls down a crippled leader. Then they'd fight among themselves for supremacy and the man who came out on top of the heap would get the ramrod's job.

"I'm payin' you ten dollars per head for every critter you fetch acrost the border from the Santa Margarita," Sam Pringle had promised Jim Olcott. "And I'll pay off your crew, or what's left of 'em, when you deliver your trail herd here."

Jim Olcott worked his renegades from daybreak until dark, and each man had stood his two hours night guard to boot. Twelve cowhands, a horse wrangler and nighthawk to hold the remuda, and a cook. The horse wrangler and nighthawk and cook were Mexicans. The rest of the outfit were tough gringos. And there wasn't a sorry cowhand in the outfit. They filled their empty bellies twice a day with pinto beans and jerky and dutch oven bread and washed the grub down with strong black coffee. They changed horses two, three times a day and fetched in their drives of Mexican cattle. Then Jim Olcott would cut out what cattle he wanted into the day herd and they shoved back and turned loose the surplus. It didn't take more than two weeks of hard work to gather two thousand head of cattle. The Santa Margarita range was well stocked. And Lobo Jones had allowed no wanton slaughter of cattle when he led his rebel cavalry across this vast strip of Sonora on their way to join Pancho Villa's army at Juarez. . . . Lobo Jones had his eye on the Santa Margarita because it was his Promised Land, and he made his rebels butcher only the culls for jerky. Because Lobo Jones was coming back to set himself up as Don Lobo when he was given the vast Santa Margarita Grant as his reward in aiding the revolution.

So Lobo Jones had given his rebels orders to butcher only what beef they needed for jerky, and to leave the big Santa Margarita remuda intact. Also they were to leave alone the mare bunch and stud in their big pasture.

"But kill every del Castillo you find," he ordered, "men, women, kids—kill 'em all. Don't leave so much as a week-old baby that wears the del Castillo name."

Lobo Jones wanted a clear title to the Santa Margarita Grant. And judging from the number of new graves with wooden crosses that bore the del Castillo name, Lobo Jones had done a grimly thorough job of massacre, so that in future years no del Castillo could ever

lay claim to the million acres of mountains and desert country within the wide boundaries.

JIM OLCOTT had his herd gathered and trimmed and ready for the hundred mile drize to the Arizona border. They were laying over a few days on good feed and water to rest their horses and catch up on their sleep.

They were roundsiding in the cool of the evening when a lone rider showed up—a young Mexican in faded cotton pants and shirt. He had an old straw sombrero pulled down on sweat-matted black hair, and his bare feet were shoved into old huaraches. He was riding bareback on a half-starved Mexican mule, and he looked no older than sixteen or seventeen.

"Another damn' greaser," said one of the cowpunchers, "come to beg grub and tobaccer. The last 'un that got the wrinkles outa his belly at our camp stole a whole damn caddy of Bull Durham outa my warsack. I'll make this 'un pay off the debt."

Jim Olcott slapped the six-shooter out of the man's hand, his own gun thumbed to full cock.

"I'll do what killin' there is to be done around camp, Bulger," he said flatly. "I ain't so short-handed but what I kin manage to worry along without you. Pick up your gun, if you feel that lucky."

Bulger was a big-muscled man with reddish sandy hair and pale green eyes—a big-mouthed man who bragged about the Mexicans he had shot and never bothered to notch their tally on his gun handle. A trouble maker. But Jim Olcott wasn't bluffing. He almost wanted to kill Bulger, and get it done with. Bulger was after his ramrod job.

"I'll let the gun lay, Olcott." Bulger grinned and reached into another cowhand's shirt pocket to help himself to the man's sack of tobacco and cigarette papers. "But you'll feed the wrong greaser before we're outa Mexico. And he'll ride off with the news and fetch back Lobo Jones to take this gatherment of cattle. We bin lucky so far. But I got a hunch you're crowdin' your luck, Olcott. I kin smell Lobo Jones a-comin'."

"You'd know his stink," said Jim Olcott. "You traveled with him a-plenty, Bulger, from what I bin told."

"That's right, Olcott. Me'n Lobo Jones was like that." Bulger held up two big fingers. "Lemme tell you boys about the time me'n Lobo taken over that greaser dance hall at Prieta. . . . We run the men off—all but the musicians—and then we taken our pick of them purty little señoritas."

Bulger launched forth on one of his dirty stories. Jim Olcott, still with his gun in his hand, turned away in disgust.

"I am Chico," said the young Mexican in a small voice. "I am very weak from hunger. I will work hard to pay for the grub you feed me. I do not steal. I am no spy to take the news to that Lobo Jones. I am very hungry. I will work hard to pay. I have no home. El Lobo has killed all my family. *Por Dios, señor.* . . . ." The young Mexican spoke English without Mexican accent, measuring each word carefully.

"Turn your mule loose, boy. Nobody here is goin' to hurt you. Pelon will fix you up with grub. Feed this boy with all the grub he can eat, Pelon." Jim Olcott spoke sharply to the grizzled Mexican cook.

Then Jim Olcott sent Bulger, and three others who had their night horses saddled, out on first guard.

It was dusk and the evening star had just showed in the cloudless sky and in the dim soft gray light Jim Olcott watched the young Mexican eat.

"Take smaller bites, boy." Jim Olcott grinned. "And chew your grub. You go wolfin' it down in big chunks, you'll be sick. Take your time, boy." The bleak look in his puckered blue eyes softened in the twilight.

This was no downtrodden young peon. There was breeding in the clean, almost delicate line of this young Mexican's face. He had a straight, thin-nostriled nose and firm-lipped mouth with even white teeth. His cheeks were flat-planed and his forehead well-shaped, his small ears flat and half hidden by thick black hair. His hands and feet were not those of a coarse-boned peon. The hands were long and small-boned, the feet small-boned and narrow. No paddle-footed *pelado*, this young Mexican. The faded rags and the sweat-streaked dirt that grimed the olive skin served as no more than a pitiful disguise. This young Mexican was a del Castillo, Jim Olcott told himself.

Jim Olcott glanced around at the members of his tough renegade cowhand crew and saw they were paying no attention to the young Mexican. There was a crap game started and they squatted around a bed tarp watching the roll of the dice.

SATISFIED, Jim Olcott cut a hard searching look at the bald Pelon. That grizzled old Mexican had been born and raised on the big Santa Margarita ranch. He had been run off by the rebels. And now Pelon was pouring strong black coffee into the big tin cup and handing it to the ragged young Mexican with all the humility and humbleness of a trained peon servant. That cinched it. Pelon would have let a ragged young peon boy help himself as best he could.

Jim Olcott rolled and lit a cigarette. The young Mexican ate with head lowered, the dirty old straw sombrero hiding most of his dusty, sweat-streaked face.

"Slower, Chico." Jim Olcott squatted near

the young Mexican, lowered his voice. "Eat your grub slower. You don't want to get a bellyache.

Young Chico's head tilted sideways. A faint smile spread across cheeks that bulged with grub, dark eyes crinkling almost shut. The eyes studied the tow-headed ramrod for a long moment.

"You are not an evil man," he said, "but you must be a gringo cattle rustler. Or you would not be here on the Santa Margarita, no?"

"I need an extra horse wrangler," answered Jim Olcott. "You said you have no home to go back to. Work on through with this outfit and when we cross the border you'll be safe—young del Castillo."

The young Mexican's head jerked up and fear darkened his eyes.

*"Madre de Dios!"* Pelon's voice was a hissing whisper. A whetted, sharp-pointed butcher knife came up in his gnarled old hand.

"Easy, Pelon!" warned Jim Olcott curtly. "Put up the knife before those gringo renegades take notice." He spoke in rapid Mexican. "The boy's secret is safe with me. I want to help him. I'm no damned Lobo Wolf Jones."

Pelon quickly shoved the knife out of sight and the glitter went out of his opaque black eyes. His bald head nodded.

"That is true, Patron. You are a good man. There is no evil in your heart. With you the secret is safe. But when you spoke that name, I was startled, senor, and frightened. . . ." Then old Pelon spoke softly to the young Mexican.

"It is better that you should eat and then, when it is dark, to get your mule and disappear in the night. The Senor Olcott is a man. But these others are no more than wolves. Is better you go when it is dark. I will go with you."

And old Pelon stood stiff-backed to meet Jim Olcott's eyes.

Jim Olcott had been watching the young Mexican. Now he looked into the old Mexican's eyes and nodded, a faint grin twisting a corner of his mouth.

"That would be best, Pelon," he agreed quickly. "Take the two best horses from the remuda. And take guns and enough grub. Then head straight for the Arizona border. You're right. These hombres are no better than wolves."

*"Gracias, Patron.* The Senor Dios will reward you."

"I shall light a candle, senor." The young Mexican's voice was barely audible. "I shall pray for you."

There, in the dim light, the young Mexican's eyes showed dark and soft, like the eyes of a girl.

The round-up was camped on a creek that threaded down through the foothills to sing in the sandy desert that flattened out towards the north. The stars were coming out and a round moon pushed up over the ragged skyline. Out where the remuda grazed, the Mexican nighthawk sang a little ranchero song. The sharp crack of a saddle carbine cut the song apart, and the shrill scream of a dying Mexican ended the song forever.

As if it were some pre-arranged signal, and as if conjured up by some trick of black magic, armed men on foot suddenly appeared. There was no way of counting them. There must have been a hundred. Their gun barrels glinting in the moonlight. They had left their saddled horses somewhere and crept up on foot through the brush.

"Throw away your guns, you gringo cabrons!" barked a harsh voice. "Pronto! Or do you want to die now?"

"Lobo Jones!" One of the tough renegades threw down his gun and lifted both hands high. "I don't wanta die this young!" he wailed.

*"Madre de Dios!"* Old Pelon's voice was a croaking whisper. *"El Lobo!"*

Jim Olcott raised both hands to the level of his shoulders. He spoke in a low tone to the young Mexican.

"Courage, young Chico. . . Be brave, boy, be brave."

Young Chico stood up, making the sign of the cross, to stand between the big towheaded ramrod and old Pelon.

"I am no coward, senor."

"I know that."

From out in the direction of the bedded herd of Mexican cattle the big deep-throated voice of the renegade Bulger sang a ribald verse of Cucaracha that was Pancho Villa's marching song.

"Ai, Chihuahua! Viva El Lobo!" Bulger finished his song.

And then Jim Olcott knew, for certain, that which he had been suspecting for days—that Bulger had sold them out to Lobo Jones. Somehow the treacherous Bulger had gotten word to Lobo Jones that Big Sam Pringle had sent Jim Olcott down with a tough outfit to gather a herd of Mexican cattle. And Bulger had bought off most of Jim Olcott's cowhands. Those tough renegades were grinning wickedly as they threw away their guns and lifted their hands in surrender.

"I hope to hell," spoke one of the renegades, "you curly wolves fetched likker to drink. We bin workin' on crick water and lousy Mexican coffee."

"There'll be likker."

The voice came, flat-toned, from behind the brush. And then Lobo Jones rode out from behind the manzanita thicket.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Prisoner of the Devil

HE WOULD have passed almost in any light for a Mexican. His hair and mustache were coarse, straight black, his skin weathered dark. He wore the shabby leather jacket and tight fitting, flared-bottom breeches of the Rurale dress uniform, its silver embroidered design tarnished almost black. Even his saddle was a silver-crusted Mexican hand-tooled job, and he was riding one of the prized golden horses of Mexico—a palomino stolen from the prized palominos that belonged to Presidente Diaz of Mexico.

Lobo Jones was a man whose past was blotted out and shrouded in mystery, a legendary figure. Jones was probably not his name. And his heart was as black as his hair. His big white teeth bared in a wolfish grin. Tall, strongly made, he sat a horse well. Two silver-handled six-shooters in Mexican carved holsters hung from filled cartridge belts that sagged around his lean flanks.

Now he slid one of the guns from its holster and pointed it at Jim Olcott's lean belly. He thumbed back the hammer.

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"So you are the tow-headed Jim Olcott that my old compadre Sam Pringle sent down to gut my Santa Margarita?" His voice was toneless.

"I'm ramroddin' this *pasear*." Jim Olcott's mirthless grin flattened his lips. His blue eyes were bleak.

"What's your name?" Lobo Jones asked. "I mean your real name?"

"Jim Olcott. What's yours?"

The dark eyes of Lobo Jones narrowed. "I like to know a man's real name so that I can brand it on the cross that marks his grave. Have you got anything to say before I gut-shoot you, Olcott?"

"No."

"Then I will put off that pleasure," Lobo Jones grinned wolfishly, "till you feel more like talking. Mebbyso you are no more than Sam Pringle's hired man. But most maybe you are something bigger than a hired hand. In which case I can collect a bounty on you. *Quien sabe?* I have ways of making you talk, hombre."

Lobo Jones rode his big palomino into the clearing where the bedrolls were scattered between the rope corral and the spot near Pelon's campfire where his dutch ovens and skillets and huge black coffeepot showed at the edge of the bed of red coals. He eyed Pelon and the ragged young Mexican with swift appraisal, then shrugged his contempt for them. His gun still warily covered Jim Olcott, and he watched the big ramrod as if hoping he would make a gun play so that he could pull the trigger of his silver mounted six-shooter. Lobo Jones was a killer who loved his work.

"Hogtie this Jim Olcott gringo," Lobo Jones ordered his men. "But don't steal his hat or boots till he's dead. Take that bald-headed old buzzard of a Mexican and stand him against a boulder and shoot him. But first we will enjoy some fun in the moonlight, no?" And Lobo Jones bared his white teeth and his dark eyes glittered like the eyes of a lobo wolf.

"Take that young Mexican and strip off his rags. Tie his arms and legs with his bare belly against that big suhuaro cactus on the ridge. Then chop down the suhuaro and roll it down the hill over there. *Pronto, hombrecitos!*"

Jim Olcott's lifted hands clenched till the knuckles were bone-white. He cut a quick look at old Pelon and then his cold blue eyes swiveled to Lobo Jones.

Lobo Jones' mongrel renegades moved out from behind the brush and boulders; they moved warily, like animals—an unsavory mixture of gringos and mixed breeds and Mexicans and a few Yaquis. Armed with guns and big, sharp-edged machetes, they were a ragtag crew in their cotton pants and shirts, their bare feet shoved into huaraches.

Old Pelon caught Jim Olcott's quick look. Lobo Jones had reined up so that the sleek rump of the big palomino was towards the camp fire where Pelon and the young Mexican stood.

It was done so neatly that nobody saw how it happened. Old bald Pelon bent down. One gnarled hand scooped up some coals and with a swift unbroken movement tossed the red-hot embers at the sleek rump of the palomino.

Then several things happened, all in a matter of seconds. The big palomino snorted and lunged, pitching and bucking. One of the hot coals fell into the back of Lobo Jones' open collar. The man let out a sharp yelp of pain. The cocked gun in his hand exploded, the .45 slug tearing into the ground near Jim Olcott's feet. Lobo Jones lost a stirrup. He grabbed at the silver-crusted saddle horn, missed it, and bucked off in a flying leap. Jim Olcott grabbed him in mid-air and they crashed to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs while the live coal burned into Lobo Jones' back until the man screamed with the agony.

Jim Olcott's renegade cowhands stared, slack-jawed, then scattered in a wild scramble to get out of the way of the enraged, pitching palomino. The big tapadero-covered stirrups with their silver mountings flapped crazily with every jump the bucking horse made.

LOBO JONES' ragtag rebels halted in their tracks, gaping, too bewildered for the moment to do anything but stare at the pitching palomino and at Lobo Jones and Jim Olcott, who were rolling over and over. Jim Olcott's left hand gripped Lobo Jones' thick black hair and his right fist punched the rebel leader's face till the blood spurted from Lobo Jones' smashed nose. The short, savage, chopping blows drowned the Lobo's screams into blood-choked moans.

Old Pelon grabbed up his saddle carbine with one hand. His other hand had a tight hold on the arm of the young Mexican, Chico. Pelon dove into the thick brush, dragging Chico with him. The darkening shadows of dusk hid the old Mexican and the young one as they made their escape. They had mounted the first horses they found and were gone in the early night before anybody took notice of their escape.

Jim Olcott fought with a desperate fury. There could be but one end to it and that was death, but he prolonged that end as best he could. And while he pounded at the face of Lobo Jones, he made no effort to kill the man. In the back of his mind was a vague hope that he might come out alive. But right now he fought to give old Pelon and the ragged young del Castillo their chance to

escape. Now, he quit pounding Lobo Jones' face. He pulled his six-shooter and shoved it into Lobo Jones' belly and sat back, knowing nothing of the live coal that was branding the man he held down.

"Back!" Jim Olcott shouted at the men who came towards him in a narrowing circle that bristled with gun barrels and machete blades. "Stay back or I'll blow a hole through your Lobo's yellow belly!"

"My back!" Lobo Jones spat out blood with the words. "It's burnin' a hole plumb through my back!"

Blood blinded his eyes, and perhaps he never saw the gun that Jim Olcott had shoved into his belly. Lobo Jones braced his legs and his high heels dug deep and he took the weight on the back of his head and shoulders and heaved upwards to arch his back clear of the burning coal. It burnt through the flannel shirt and the soft leather charro jacket and fell smoldering to the ground. He twisted and lifted..

Jim Olcott was thrown off balance. A rawhide reata hissed as it was thrown the length of its sixty feet. The small noose dropped down neatly over Olcott's head and shoulders, then jerked tight around his arms and he was yanked over backwards and dragged across the ground.

The other end of the rawhide reata was dallied around a saddle horn and the horse that dragged him off Lobo Jones was ridden by the big, red-headed, red-whiskered Bulger. There was a twisted grin on Bulger's sunburnt face and his eyes were slivers of green glass.

"Fall on 'im, you curly wolves!" Bulger yelled savagely.

They piled on top of Jim Olcott like a wolf pack. And they would have killed him if Lobo Jones had not shouted at them to hogtie him and let him lay there.

"Don't kill him! I want that tow-headed gringo cabron kept alive."

Lobo Jones peeled off his charro jacket and the flannel shirt. The live coal had burned a livid brand down along the white hide of his back. His face was masked in an ugly smear of dirt and blood and the blood spilled from his smashed nose.

Bulger had a gun in his hand. His rawhide reata was coiled and dropped over his saddle horn. He grinned down into Jim Olcott's battered face.

"You ain't ramroddin' this little *pasear* no longer, Olcott. It's my spread now. You know any reason why I shouldn't pull this trigger?"

Lobo Jones stood on widespread legs, naked to the waistband of his leather charro pants. His voice was flat toned, ugly.

"Put up that gun, Bulger," Lobo Jones ordered the red-head, "and git back out to your cattle."

"I taken too much already," snarled the red-whiskered Bulger, "off this tow-headed son?"

"Ride back to your cattle, Bulger, I said."

"Lemme kill this skunk first."

"Jim Olcott is worth more to me alive—but hombres like you can be bought for a dime a dozen." One of his silver-mounted six-shooters was gripped in Lobo Jones' hand. "You need fu'ther proof, Bulger, that I kin git along without you?"

Bulger's red face mottled, and slowly he slid his gun back into its holster.

"A hell of a way to thank a man that just saved your hide."

"Lobo Jones thanks no man for anything. Drag it while your luck holds out, Bulger."

THERE was a renegade doctor with Lobo Jones' rebel cavalry outfit, and he salved the Lobo's burnt back with a strong-odored ointment and taped on an oiled dressing.

When he had bathed his face clean, Lobo Jones put on his shirt and jacket and walked over to where Jim Olcott lay tied hand and foot and kicked him savagely in the belly and ribs. Then he reached down and pulled him up by his blood-matted hair, propping him up in a sitting position.

"Now," he said, "you will see how Lobo Jones takes care of his prisoners," and he lifted his flat-toned voice to call orders to his men.

"Stand the old bald-headed Mexican up against that big boulder and hang him up with a rope from the tree limb so that his feet touch the ground. Then strip the boy and tie him to that suhuaro on the ridge. Chop it down and roll him down the hill with it. You ever see that done, Olcott? Those cactus spines'll tear out his guts. Pronto, you hombres! Let's put on a circus for Sam Pringle's tow-headed Jim Olcott."

The renegades shifted uneasily under Lobo Jones' hard-eyed stare. Finally one of them broke the uneasy silence.

"They got away, Lobo. They—"

Lobo Jones' dark eyes glittered; the gun in his hand spewed flame. The luckless renegade who had broken the bad news doubled up, clawing at his bullet-ripped guts and he writhed on the ground, screaming in agony.

Lobo Jones shot the screaming Mexican through the head. Then he ejected the two empty shells from his silver-mounted gun and shoved in fresh cartridges. He stood over Jim Olcott, murder in his slitted eyes. His voice was flat-toned, deadly.

"That old bald-headed buzzard, Pelon, was born and raised on the Santa Margarita—used to be major domo there. He got away when

we took the ranch. Sam Pringle sent him down here with you. . . . . *Why?*" And he kicked Jim Olcott in the belly.

"Why?" he repeated, when the big tow-headed ramrod had recovered his wind.

"To cook our grub." Jim Olcott spat blood and dirt out with the flat statement.

Lobo Jones reached down and grabbed his matted hair and yanked his bloody head back savagely.

"Why did Sam Pringle send old Pelon along? You savvy damned well it wasn't to cook frijoles and jerky. Why?"

"To cook our grub, I told you."

Lobo Jones kicked Jim Olcott in the face this time, and the big ramrod's head snapped backwards and he went over and lay still, pain blurring his senses.

Lobo Jones' dark eyes were bloodshot, glittering. He was breathing hard like a man who has been running, and sweat beaded his swarthy skin. His hands were clenched till the knuckles showed bone-white as he fought to regain control of his violent temper. He turned away from where Jim Olcott lay on the ground and spent his fury on his renegades, cursing them for letting Pelon and the ragged young Mexican escape. Then he told them to throw water on Jim Olcott till they got him alive again.

## CHAPTER THREE

### "Here's Your Damn Ears!"

LOBO JONES poured tequila down Jim Olcott's throat and untied his bound hands. He put a sheet of writing paper on one of the rawhide-covered kyack boxes and dipped a pen into a bottle of black ink. Then he shoved the dripping pen into the big tow-headed ramrod's cramped hand.

"Now you'll write a letter," Lobo Jones' white teeth bared, "to my old compadre, Sam Pringle. Tell him his trail herd is on the way. But before those two thousand head of Santa Margarita dogies cross the border, he's to send a lone messenger with the cash money to pay me for 'em. At twenty dollars a head them cattle will cost him forty thousand dollars—cash. If I don't get it, Bulger turns the herd loose and them cattle will be scattered from hell to breakfart. Write *that* down, you tow-headed son!"

Jim Olcott wrote it down. The pen scratched and blotted on the coarse writing paper, and while the writing was cramped, and uneven, it was legible enough. Lobo Jones read what was written down; then he told Jim Olcott to sign his name to it and Olcott did. After that, Lobo Jones took the pen and ordered his men to tie the prisoner's hands behind his back again.

Lobo Jones dipped the pen into the ink bottle and shook off the surplus ink. His eyes glittered.

"How much," he asked, "do you reckon you're worth to Sam Pringle? Alive?"

The potent tequila was taking hold. Jim Olcott felt its glow warming his belly and threading through his veins. It thawed out the numbness that had crept into his brain and he eyed Lobo Jones coldly.

"Up until you double-crossed him down here in Sonora," said Jim Olcott, "you and Big Sam Pringle were pardners. You know him better than I do. No man is worth two bits to Sam Pringle unless Big Sam has use for him. The shape I'm in now, hogtied and afoot, I'm worthless. I'd be lyin' if I said he'd pay so much as a Mexican 'dobe peso to ransom me loose."

"You're right, tow-head. Bulger kin point that trail herd acrost the border, an' Bulger's ramroddin' your *pasear* outfit now. He's ridin' the point on that trail herd and he'll walk-bawl them dogies till he delivers 'em acrost the border or till I give him orders to turn 'em loose an' spill 'em far an' wide. But that ain't what I'm drivin' at, and you know it."

"Lay it on the line then," said Jim Olcott flatly.

Lobo Jones slapped him hard across the mouth. "You're the feller that's turnin' 'em face up, Olcott. I'll do the readin'. Sam Pringle wants the Santa Margarita. He sent old Pelon along with your outfit. Pelon don't scare easy. For a Mexican, he's got guts. But he had the fear chilled in him when he quit the Santa Margarita. It would take more than all the money Sam Pringle could fork over to fetch old Pelon back on the Santa Margarita range."

He paused, his eyes slitted. "I want to know why Pelon come with you. And I want to know why Big Sam Pringle sent you instead of Bulger to ramrod this *pasear*. Sam Pringle knows that Bulger could git the job done, because Bulger would make a deal with Lobo Jones to work the Santa Margarita range and git protection all the way to the border." Lobo Jones squatted on his hunkers to stare straight into Jim Olcott's bloodshot blue eyes.

"What's your game, Olcott? You've got a little spread of your own—your own brand. Your place fringes on Pringle's big outfit and he hired you to ramrod his Arizona spread. He's turned it over to you to run and you bin ramroddin' it for a long time. Sam Pringle kin trust you because you can't be bought off and you don't scare easy. On top of that you belong to the Arizona Rangers. You're one of that nameless dozen that was sworn in by the Territorial Governor. You don't wear a badge, but you manage to git the job done. Lobo Jones is on the Ranger blacklist. Could

be you slipped acrost the Mexican border to hang the hide of Lobo Jones on your Ranger fence. Big Sam Pringle would pay you a fat bounty on my hide, to boot. . . .

"But Sam Pringle is too long-headed to gamble away the one man he kin trust to run his Arizona outfit. A renegade like Bulger would either murder Lobo Jones for that bounty or git killed a-tryin', and if Bulger got killed the loss wouldn't matter to Big Sam. He'd send another renegade down here to pick it up where Bulger dropped it. Big Sam Pringle sent you down here and he sent old Pelon along with you. I want to know why, damn you to hell!"

"Worries you a lot, don't it?" Jim Olcott licked the blood from his bruised mouth.

The ink had dried on the pen point. Lobo Jones dipped it in the ink bottle and shook it. He wrote slowly, in a bold Spencerian handwriting, across the paper. Then he fanned it dry and held it in front of Jim Olcott's eyes.

"I am holding Jim Olcott prisoner," he read, "at the Santa Margarita headquarters ranch. I will hold him one week before I 'dobe-wall him. What is he worth to you alive? My messenger will fetch it to me. Make it big enough or you get his tow-head in a gunny-sack. Enclosed find a pair of ears. Lobo Jones."

Lobo Jones folded the ransom note. He took a couple of shriveled human ears and shoved them with the note into a big heavy brown envelope which he sealed and gave to the armed messenger who waited on his saddled horse.

*"Vamose, hombre,"* Lobo Jones told the man, "and fetch me back the right answer and I'll keep you drunk the rest of your life. *Adios!"*

Lobo Jones drank his tequila like a Mexican, with a pinch of salt and half a lime to suck after he drank. He had his men strip Jim Olcott and stake him out in the blistering sun. When the prisoner's tongue was dry and coated from thirst Lobo Jones would fill a big tin cup with water and let a few drops fall into Jim Olcott's parched mouth, then pour the rest of the cool water out on the ground.

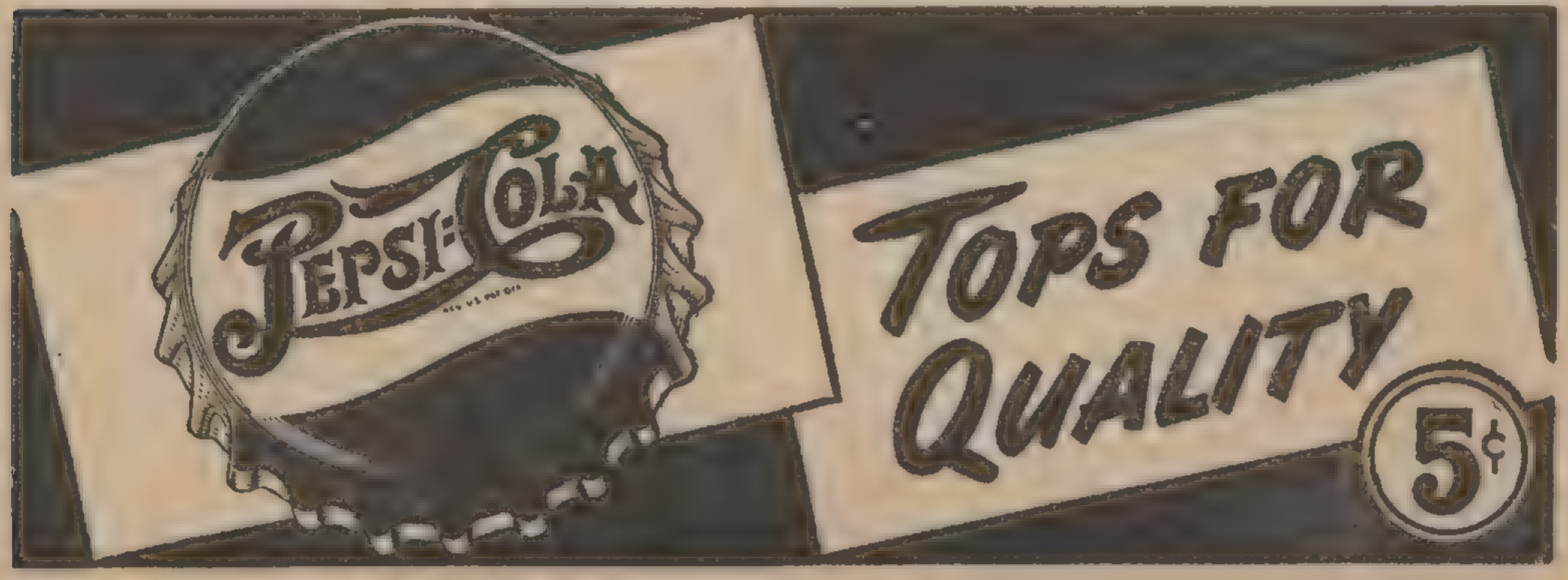
"When you feel like talkin', tow-head, you'll git watered."

JIM OLCOTT suffered his tortures as best he could—thirst and pain and the blistering heat. Sweat poured from him until the sun went down. Then he lay there, naked and chilled, until he lóst consciousness. And it was while he was unconscious, during the hours of the night, that one of Lobo Jones' Mexicans would give him water and rub his sunburnt hide with thick native olive oil mixed with something that drew the burning fever out of him. The man also fed him thick bean soup that he did not taste; then he would slip away under the cover of darkness again. And the armed guards would squat there smoking their cornhusk cigarettes, that glowed in the night like firebugs.

*"Por Santa Margarita,"* they would whisper softly while they stood guard, and one of them ministered to the prisoner. *"Por Santa Margarita. . . . ."*

Lobo Jones, half drunk in his one-man tepee tent, smoking cigarettes that had marihuana mixed in with the strong Mexican tobacco, slept as a lobo wolf sleeps, lightly, awaking at every little noise outside his tent, which was protected by armed guards. Long before the earliest possible time for the return of his messenger to Sam Pringle Lobo Jones became impatient. He drank more than his wont, mixed more and more marihuana into his tobacco. And he was up and on the prowl at all hours of the night. Lobo Jones was like some dangerous lobo wolf that smells the coming of the hound pack.

Lobo Jones, renegade, had prowled the Mexican border for a long time, rustling cattle, stealing horses that he sold to the rebels,



running guns and ammunition to the rebel army. Sam Pringle had been his silent partner in the border transactions—big, paunchy Sam Pringle, who sat back and banked his gambling games and drank his quart-a-day at his Border Club. Safe, taking no chances, but buying the guns and ammunition that Lobo Jones ran across the border.

Lobo Jones took all the risks and got the short cut of the big profits. . . . . Until he outwolfed Sam Pringle and made his secret deal with the Mexican politico who was Pancho Villa's agent. Then Lobo Jones had ridden at the head of his own ragtag renegade rebel cavalry, killing and plundering and burning—sweeping across the vast Santa Margarita Grant like a swarm of locusts: destroying, murdering, recruiting armed followers to join Pancho Villa's main army at Juarez. . . . .

*"Viva Villa!*
*And me tambien!*
*We'll take Juarez*
*But God knows when!"*

Lobo Jones and his drunken, marihuana smoking renegades, shouting their battle cry . . . . . Never suspecting that many of these recruited Mexicans were men born and raised on the old Santa Margarita. Their loyalty to old Don Estaban and the name of del Castillo was as deep rooted as their unquestioning belief in their *Senor Dios* and their Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Old Mexico. . . . And, all the time they shouted their drunken *Vivas* they held only hatred in their Mexican hearts for this black-haired, dark-eyed gringo who called himself Lobo Jones.

Then Lobo Jones and his ragtag army had been turned back—ordered back by a curt message from Pancho Villa. The order said to return to the Santa Margarita, and you did not dare disobey an order that came direct from that Pancho Villa.

But Lobo Jones had prowled the border too long. He hated the Mexicans, distrusted them. And Lobo Jones suspected a trap had been set for him—or what he called a "Mexican standoff." Pancho Villa had a grisly sense of humor, if you could believe the stories about him.

Pancho Villa had a strange and disconcerting sense of loyalty. Time had been when Sam Pringle and Pancho Villa had been close friends, down in Chihuahua. There was a story that told how Sam Pringle, younger then and before his hard-muscled bulk had softened to fat from easy living, had stood back to back with a younger Pancho Villa while together they had fought and won a gun battle against big odds. Later, they had drifted apart, disagreed about something, and rumor said they had become enemies. Rumor could be wrong, however.

Sam Pringle and old Don Estaban had been friends. Pringle had bought thousands of cattle from Don Estaban's Santa Margarita ranch. Don Estaban had been staunchy loyal to Porfirio Diaz, Presidente of Mexico, bitter against Pancho Villa. And Sam Pringle was said to have made a deal with Pancho Villa that Villa's rebels would never ride across the Santa Margarita range, that the Santa Margarita must be held intact and unviolated when the Revolution came to overthrow Diaz and put Madero in power. Unless Pancho Villa agreed, Sam Pringle would stop the supply of guns and ammunition to the rebels. . . . .

But Lobo Jones had made his double crossing deal with a Mexican who claimed to be Pancho Villa's agent. And for his reward, Lobo Jones had been promised the Santa Margarita Grant.

To make certain he would not be cheated, Lobo Jones had killed Don Estaban and had also killed every man, woman, and child who bore any kinship or claim to the del Castillo name. Lobo Jones and his renegades had done a thorough job of slaughter and massacre and left the dead for old Padre Juan and the black-robed nuns to bury. Then they had ridden on. . . . . And one day Lobo Jones would turn that old church into a cantina and use the ancient altar for a bar. The bell of Santa Margarita would be melted down to make bullets!

Bulger was pointing the trail herd on towards the border. When the messenger got back with Sam Pringle's money for the cattle and his reply to the ransom for Jim Olcott, Lobo Jones would ride on to the Santa Margarita ranch. He'd break into the old wine cellar, make a fiesta. . . . . But why had Sam Pringle sent a man like Jim Olcott down across the border? And why had he sent old Pelon along with Jim Olcott's outfit? Why?

Lobo Jones prowled the gray dawn. And out of the sunrise rode his messenger!

THE messenger led a pack mule. The Mexican mule was packed light. There was a wide grin on the messenger's face that showed through the fatigue from his long, hard journey.

Lobo Jones unbuckled the flaps of the big leather kyack bags. The leather bags were filled with gold and U. S. currency. There was forty thousand dollars in real money!

The messenger handed Lobo Jones a sealed envelope. Across it was written the name Lobo Jones.

Lobo Jones tore it open. The shriveled pair of ears fell out. Lobo Jones' dark eyes glittered as he read Sam Pringle's message.

Arizona Ranger Jim Olcott has the name of Sam Pringle at the top of his Ranger blacklist. I wouldn't give you two bits for Jim Olcott, dead or alive. I sent him down on that *pasear* to get rid of him. I would thank you for 'dobe walling Ranger Jim Olcott, but I have a hunch that Lobo Jones and Jim Olcott have thrown in together to skin Big Sam Pringle alive. You can tell your pardner Olcott that he lost his Ranger commission when he crossed the border. I hamstrung him. You are both thick-skulled if you think you can milk me for a peso of ransom money. But I will buy all the Santa Margarita cattle the two of you can gather and trail across the border. If ever either of you blacklegs feel that lucky, pay me a visit at the Border Club. Don't try any more damn fool ransom games on an old hand like Big Sam Pringle. . . . P.S. Here's your damn ears. They ain't Jim Olcott's. That double crossing tow-headed ex-Ranger has mule ears.

Lobo Jones cut the rawhide thongs that bound Jim Olcott's hands and feet. He poured tequila down Olcott's throat and handed him Sam Pringle's note.

"You're a mule-headed son, Olcott. Why didn't you tell me Sam Pringle hated your guts?"

He handed over the note. Jim Olcott's bloodshot eyes narrowed as he read it. He handed it back without comment after a long moment.

"I kin use you, Olcott. I need a man that hates Sam Pringle. String your bets with Lobo Jones and one of these nights we'll ride our horses into Sam Pringle's Border Club and take it over. I bin treatin' you kinda rough. But that'll just make the old wine in the Santa Margarita cellar taste all the sweeter. No hard feelin's, tow-head?"

Jim Olcott rubbed his lacerated wrists and ankles. His grin was flat-lipped. The oil had healed the sunburn and he stood there with his naked hide tanned almost black, so that his blue eyes looked pale, pale and bleak. He pulled on his clothes and got the boots on his swollen feet. He drank tequila and wolfed the grub from his plate. When he had a cigarette rolled and lighted he gave Lobo a delayed answer to his question.

"One of these days—I don't know when—I'll either kill you or you'll kill me. But until then, no hard feelin's, Lobo."

Their eyes met and held. They did not shake hands or drink together to seal any bargain or truce. Lobo Jones was breaking camp, bellowing orders to his ragtag outfit. They were headed straight for the Santa Margarita headquarters ranch, he told Jim Olcott. His men needed a rest and a big drunk. Then they would work the Santa Margarita range together, split the men into round-up crews.

Lobo Jones would ramrod one round-up, Jim Olcott would ramrod the other. They would get a clean enough work done on the range to shove two big trail herds up to Sam Pringle. Then, when they had enough real money, they'd split up, quit Mexico. Lobo Jones wanted to hold onto the Santa Margarita, but he'd never feel secure until he had killed Sam Pringle.

"We'll shoot that big son down there in his Border Club," said Lobo Jones. "After that I'll feel safer. You kin join back into the Rangers, mebby?"

"Mebby."

Lobo Jones was being too friendly about it. Jim Olcott buckled on his cartridge belt and holstered gun. He wasn't fooled. Lobo Jones meant to use him. And when he was through with him, Lobo Jones would kill him. Unless Jim Olcott beat him to the killing. And that was what big tow-headed Jim Olcott figured on doing.

Lobo Jones seemed satisfied with that note from Sam Pringle. But to Jim Olcott that note was as much of a puzzle as was Big Sam Pringle himself.

To be sure, the name of Sam Pringle had topped the blacklist the Ranger Captain had handed Jim Olcott a long time ago. Ranger Jim Olcott had learned the list and then burned it. He had gone straight to Big Sam Pringle, shown him the bench warrant with Pringle's name on it.

"Is there anything you'd care to do about my settin' a match to this, Sam?" Jim Olcott had come to the point without any sparring around.

"I'll stop every gun runnin' and cattle rustlin' gap along my strip of the border, Jim," Sam Pringle had answered, "if you'll do a chore for me one of these days. It's a dangerous job. Your chances of comin' out alive will be slim. But you'll come out a-sittin' on top of the cowman's big world—if you come out at all. I'm closin' my strip of border right now. You're havin' your next drink with an honest man, son."

A few weeks later he had put the proposition to Jim Olcott to take a tough crew of cowhands down across the border to work the Santa Margarita range—as difficult an assignment as any man ever got.

"Like as not you'll run into trouble down yonder. There's only one man in your outfit you kin trust. He's a bald-headed old Mexican called Pelon. He'll go down as your camp cook. He was once old Don Estaban's major domo. Ask him no questions. He'll do your cookin', and in a tight Pelon will do his damndest to see that you don't git too much the worst of it. . . ."

There had been other veiled hints that this was to be more than a cattle round-up: things

that could not be pierced together to make a whole pattern. But the pattern was there. The veiled hints tallied up to one score: the Santa Margarita Grant, in Sonora, Mexico. . . . Big Sam Pringle was after it, and he was promising Jim Olcott a share of it.

The name of Lobo Jones kept cropping up in Sam Pringle's talk. . . . Lobo Jones had to be killed.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Ave Maria

THE headquarters ranch of the vast Santa Margarita Grant was actually a small Mexican town. The old, thick-walled adobe ranch house was built around a huge patio. Beyond were the stables, also built of adobe, and the corrals of rough mesquite. Fruit trees were in bloom, and there were great irrigated hay meadows. And, scattered far and wide, were the adobe houses of the Mexicans who had bred there and had lived there for generations, most of them without ever having been beyond the far flung boundaries of the Santa Margarita Grant.

There was an old adobe church there. Its old benches and the worn tiled floor were scrubbed and swept, the altar cloths laundered, the vestments kept dustless, the candles kept burning. The old church was scrupulously cared for by a few nuns who lived in an adobe house nearby. Masses were said daily by a brown-frocked Mexican padre with snow-white hair and leathery skin and deep dark eyes that were mirrowed with sorrow and eternal peace. The good padre worked in his flower garden and tended his vineyard. The nuns cooked his meals and kept his house spotless.

The old Spanish bell swung by rawhide from its hand-hewn mahogany braces in the ancient belfry. Its deep-toned sound carried for miles to summon the faithful to mass, to toll for the dead, to ring out marriage vows or announce a christening. . . . At times of danger, it sent out the alarm. And to those who had been born and raised on the Santa Margarita, the old Spanish bell was the veritable voice of the *Señor Dios*. By its sound, they could tell what its deep toned ringing meant—birth or death, a fiesta or a funeral, or a signal to denote threatened danger.

Long before Lobo Jones and his renegade cavalry outfit were no more than a dust cloud against the blue sky, the Bell of Santa Margarita clanged its alarm and the Mexicans rallied around the old adobe church.

Those Mexicans held to their faith with a mute unquestioning devotion. White-maned Padre Juan had a brown-cowled assistant padre. They asked no questions. The brown-frocked padre's head was covered by the faded brown cowl. He knelt in the deep shadow inside the church, head bowed, his face hidden in the deep shadow of the cowl. Only the opaque black eyes had no softness in their depths. The eyes glittered, even when the cowl-hidden bald head bent seemingly in prayer before the carved wooden image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. For the shadowed eyes and hidden hairless head belonged to old Pelon. He wore his machete and cartridge belt and gun beneath the holy garb of a monk, and Pelon's were strange prayers. . . .

The older nuns whispered and giggled piously as they close-herded the beautiful young nun who sat at the big organ in the high loft at the rear of the old church. In her black garb, with the white band across her forehead framing the delicate oval of her face, the young nun had, they declared, the look of a young saint: clear olive skin, dark gray eyes that looked black under the shadow of the thick lashes, almost heavy black brows. There was nothing there to remind one of the sweat-stained dust that had covered the same young face at a round-up camp no longer than a week ago, nothing to remind one of the ragged, straw-sombreroed Chico—nothing, that is, but the eyes. For they were the dark, smoke-gray eyes of the del Castillos.

The false nun went by the name of Sister Margarita. . . .

The organist's hands caressing the old ivory keys of the organ gave forth sadly beautiful music; "Ave Maria. . . ."

The old church filled with the faithful who had answered the summons of the Bell of Santa Margarita: women and children, old men, boys in their early teens, the vaqueros who had heard the alarm and come from hiding in obedience to the summons. . . .

They wore their guns concealed, and their machetes were hidden under faded old serapes. Their eyes held on the brown-cowled Pelon kneeling in the front pew, praying.

"Give us courage. . . . strength. . . . to fight. . . . until death. . . . Amen."

And up in the choir loft one of the older nuns looked out through a tiny window.

"They come! *Madre de Dios*, have mercy on us. . . . They come, child!" Her rosary beads clicked. Her toil-worn hand rested on the head of Margarita del Castillo. . . .

"Ave. . . . ." Clear, sweet-toned. . . . the voice of an angel. . . .

"Sanctus. . . . Sanctus. . . . Sanctus. . . ." The deep-toned voice of Padre Juan, saying mass. . . .

While the women, most of them wearing the black robosos of deep mourning, knelt and prayed. . . .

Behind the church, old Don Estaban and his descendants lay in their graves. . . .

But this was a job for the living: for old

Pelon; for young Margarita del Castillo; for the pitifully few men left here. . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Six-Shooter Settlement

AS THEY rode towards the Santa Margarita ranch they could hear the tolling of the Bell of Santa Margarita. Lobo Jones had sent his renegade scouts ahead and now those scouts were fetching him back the news. His dark eyes glittered in the sunrise.

The renegade gringos and mixed-breeds among his followers now rode in bunches of fours and sixes.

The Mexicans rode together, and there were as many of them as there were mongrel gringos. They heard the ringing of the Bell of Santa Margarita and their dark faces were wooden and only their eyes changed expression as they cut sidelong looks from one to the other and covertly crossed themselves as they rode along.

Lobo Jones kept Jim Olcott alongside him as they rode stirrup to stirrup. A hand-picked bodyguard of half a dozen gringo renegades rode behind them.

Lobo Jones had cut Jim Olcott's rawhide fetters and given him back his cartridge belt and six-shooter and now Jim Olcott rode his own horse with his own saddle, and his .30-.30 carbine was in its saddle scabbard. But there had not been one moment when there wasn't a gun covering him. Jim Olcott pretended not to notice. But he knew that he was still a prisoner and that if he made the slightest move towards a gun a bullet would break his spine. Jim Olcott knew it, and Lobo Jones knew that he knew it. And that was all a part of the game they played.

Jim Olcott had been made aware of other things. He knew now that the Mexicans had oiled his sunburnt hide and given him water and nourishment and kept him alive. And in the night's darkness soft-whispered words had filtered into his ears like the almost inaudible stirring of the night breeze. So now he was aware of things that he had felt, but could not name. And now he rode with a desperate hope in his heart.

Lobo Jones had cut him free and had talked about a renegade partnership but Jim Olcott was not fooled. He was a prisoner. One wrong move and he would be shot down.

*"Por Santa Margarita. . . ."* Jim Olcott had heard the whisper in his ears as he had lain bound and helpless, and had been given water and had his burning hide smeared with healing oil. . . . *"Por Santa Margarita. . . ."*

Lobo Jones' scouts brought back the news that every man, woman and child on the Santa Margarita Grant had gathered inside the old church. Summoned at the break of day by the ringing of the old Spanish bell, they had all rallied within its ancient adobe walls.

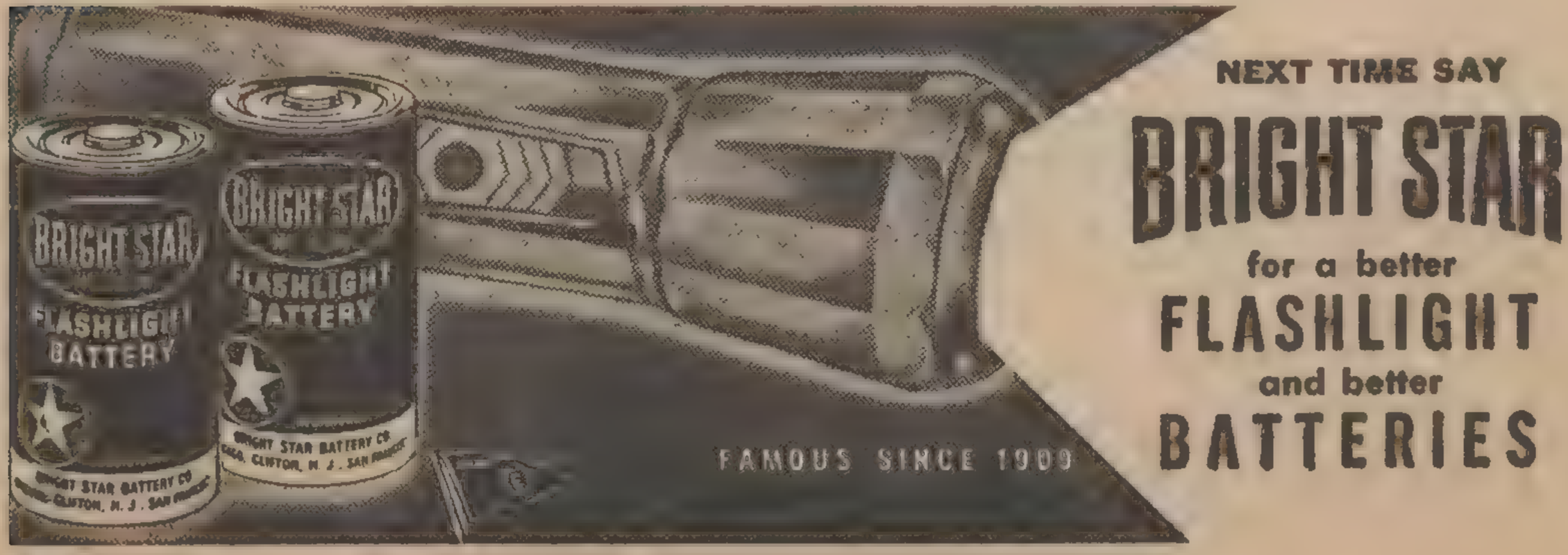
"Greasers!" Lobo Jones teeth bared in a snarl. "Women, kids, old men. What's to keep us from nailin' the doors shut and settin' fire to their damned church? Roast the greasers alive!" His bloodshot eyes watched the faces of his Mexican followers, but they gave no sign they had heard him.

When they rode up within a few hundred yards of the headquarters ranch that was, actually, the Mexican village of Santa Margarita, Lobo Jones reined up. There was not a single human being in sight. They were all inside the old church and the doors of the church were closed. The old Spanish bell was tolling softly, slowly. From inside the church came the music of the organ, the sound of a clear, sweet voice singing.

"Ave Maria. . . ."

Lobo Jones had let his ragtag rebel cavalry split up into two factions. He eyed his Mexicans with open contempt, and now gave orders to his gringo renegades to shoot down any damned greaser that got out of line. Then he grinned wolfishly at Jim Olcott.

"Tie a white rag on the end of your saddle gun, Olcott, and ride on alone to the church.



Call that damned old trouble makin' buck-nun of a Padre Juan outside and tell him to quit ringin' his damned bell. Then make him herd his Mexicans out into the open so's my men kin take their pick of the young señoritas. After that the old trouble makin' padre kin herd what we don't want back in and we'll barbecue 'em alive in their own grease. . . ." Lobo Jones was grinning, teeth bared.

Jim Olcott tied a white silk handkerchief to the end of his carbine.

"Hold on a minute!" Lobo Jones' voice was flat-toned. "Somehow, somewheres in the shuffle, I've let one del Castillo stay alive. I bin told there is one del Castillo left—old Don Estaban's grand-daughter, Margarita del Castillo. She's eighteen, and mighty easy to look at. Old Padre Juan has her hid out. Tell him Lobo Jones wants Margarita del Castillo—alive—and that if he don't produce pronto, I'll burn his damned church down with every damned greaser he's got inside there, includin' his black nuns. You got that straight?"

"I've got it." Jim Olcott's blue eyes were bleak.

"Then ride out there with your white rag. Double-cross me and I'll kill you. And just one thing more before we part company. Sam Pringle sent you down here to git Margarita del Castillo, and he sent old Pelon along to identify her and talk her into goin' back with you without your kidnappin' her. That note he wrote and sent me was a bluff." Lobo Jones lifted his voice in a loud shout.

"Bulger!"

THE big red-whiskered Bulger rode up from where he had stayed behind the rag-tag column, hidden in the dust. There was an ugly grin on his beefy face, and his bloodshot green eyes were like slivers of green glass.

"Pringle's men taken that trail herd, Olcott," Lobo Jones said. "They killed off Bulger's tough hands. But Bulger got away. He showed up last night. I bin keepin' him hid out till now. Sam Pringle gambled forty thousand dollars that he figgered he'd git back somehow. Bulger got away alive to tip me off that Sam Pringle is gamblin' for the Santa Margarita."

Lobo Jones and Bulger had guns pointed at Jim Olcott. Lobo Jones grinned.

"Now ride out with your white rag and tell Padre Juan that I'm checkin' the deal to him. He kin marry Lobo Jones to Margarita del Castillo this mornin' and we'll celebrate a weddin' fiesta. Otherwise I'll burn his church down with him and his nuns and his greaser congregation inside it."

Lobo Jones' eyes were the wicked eyes of a lobo wolf. He went on: "I saved young Margarita del Castillo. Had her hid out. But she got away, and now she's there in that church. That's her voice that's singin'. I'm marryin' her in that church. Old Padre Juan will do the job, she'll be my wife and bear me a son. And the day that son is born the Santa Margarita Grant belongs to him, because it goes to the male heir who is blood descendant of old Don Esteban del Castillo. . . .

"Ride in there now with your white rag, you towheaded son! Tell old Padre Juan that this is his last chance to save his church. And mebbyso you'll live long enough to watch the weddin'. Then I'll 'dobe-wall you and Sam Pringle will git your head in a gunnysack. . . . Ride, you tow-headed buzzard!"

Jim Olcott rode to the church with his flag of truce. The bell tolled slowly and his horse swung along at a running walk to its cadence. The organ music hushed into silence with the end of the Ave Maria.

A white-haired Mexican lined the sights of a rifle pointed through a broken window. A brown-frocked arm gripped the gun and lowered it. The faded brown cowl slid back from the glistening bald head of old Pelon.

"Not him, my old one. That man is our Patron. . . ."

Jim Olcott rode up to the closed door of the church and sat his saddle as the heavy door swung inward and Padre Juan stood there. He no longer wore his altar vesments. He stood barefooted in old huaraches, in his faded and patched old brown robe, the cowl back, his thick hair snow-white. His eyes were sunken and dark, and mirrored with sadness in his leathery seamed face.

Jim Olcott lifted his hat and the old padre made the sign of the cross. In a low voice Jim Olcott delivered the message of Lobo Jones. As he finished speaking, he looked past the old padre and into the dark gray eyes of a young nun who had the face of a madonna. He stiffened in his saddle and his hat was in his hand. The eyes of the young nun haunted him. Then she came from behind the old padre and the dark gray eyes crinkled as she smiled. Her voice had a hint of soft laughter.

"Slower, Chico," she was saying, then. "Eat your grub slower. You don't want to get a bellyache."

Then another brown-frocked padre was there, shoving the cowl back from a hairless head. A wicked grin was on the leathery face and his black eyes glittered.

"Pelon!"

Pelon undid the white cord and the brown robe slid off and he stood there in old charro leather, bristling with guns and a machete.

The girl shed her nun's garb. She, too, was wearing shabby leather charro jacket and pants and with her short hair looked like a slim boy.

Padre Juan was smiling faintly, his voice deep-toned, sadness in his dark eyes.

"There will never be a marriage to bind this child Margarita del Castillo to the murderer," he declared. "Better that all of us die than to permit such a sacrilege. Dismount from your horse, señor, and enter your church. Soon it will become our fortress—our tomb, perhaps. Dismount and come into its shelter."

"I do my fighting out in the open, Padre.... You are in charge here, Pelon?"

*"Si, Patron!"*

"Protect her well then, Pelon. Our Chico.... But Chico is the name of a boy. Chica is a girl's name. *Adiosita,* then, Chica—for a short while."

*"Vaya con Dios!"* The old padre gave him his farewell blessing.

"Go with my prayer, Señor." The girl's voice sounded. "Then come back to me—Jim Olcott!" Her face flushed.

"Perhaps, Padre Juan," Jim Olcott said with sudden boldness, "there will be a wedding fiesta here some day.... *Quien sabe?"*

Pelon's leathery face grinned and his black eyes glittered wickedly.

"Ride around behind the church, *Patron.*... You will not be alone!"

THE heavy door of the old church swung shut, and Jim Olcott reined his horse around. He ripped the white silk handkerchief from the end of his carbine barrel; standing in the stirrups, he raised the saddle carbine and squinted to line his gun sights. He got big Bulger in his sights and pulled the trigger.

He heard Bulger's hoarse bellow of pain as he whirled his horse and lay low along its neck. Bullets whined around him as he spurred around the corner of the old whitewashed adobe church and out of sight.

The old Bell of Santa Margarita clanged now as Padre Juan swung his weight on the end of the long rawhide bell rope. It clanged as if the very wrath of God gave it voice, sending its echoes far into the mountains and deserts of the vast Santa Margarita.

As if that were the signal for which they had waited since the day they were born, the ragtag Mexican rebels under Lobo Jones' command went into swift and violent action. They had no need of mescal or marihuana to fire their fighting blood now. They fought for the Bell of Santa Margarita, fought with a frenzied fury that nothing but death could stop.

*"Por Santa Margarita!"* The soft whisper Jim Olcott had heard in the black hours of tortured night was now a wild battle cry. *"Por Santa Margarita!"*

Whoever said that Mexicans cannot fight would have had the lie shot back into his mouth had he been there at the Santa Margarita that cloudless sunrise.

Lobo Jones' gringos and renegade 'breeds fought back, desperately, until they were shot from their saddles or hacked down by the heavy-bladed machetes. The screams and curses of the dying mingled with the rattle of gunfire. And from behind the whitewashed adobe walls of the old church Jim Olcott led a motley army of old men and boys and a sprinkling of hard riding vaqueros. And flanking Jim Olcott rode old Pelon, a silver-crusted old felt sombrero tilted rakishly on his bald head.

Bulger, blood seeping sluggishly from his

# THE TWENTY-FIFTH HOUR

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bullet-ripped shoulder, lifted his voice to a bellow, shooting wildly as he spurred his horse.

Lobo Jones would have turned and run like some lobo wolf before a hound pack, for his slitted eyes were quick to see that his swaggering conquest had been twisted and turned back on him into a bloody defeat. But Jim Olcott cut him off. Not a gun was fired at either of them as Jim Olcott spurred out across the open to head off Lobo Jones. And then the dark-eyed Lobo saw that escape was impossible and he bared his teeth and rode straight at the big tow-headed Jim Olcott.

Both men held their fire until they were within six-shooter range. They shoved their carbines into saddle scabbards and rode at each other with their six-shooters cocked. And they were within easy stone's toss of one another when they fired.

Not more than a split-second's time separated their first shots. The two guns sounded like one explosion. And both bullets hit their mark. But Jim Olcott had the split-second advantage. His bullet smashed Lobo Jones's right shoulder and spoiled the Lobo's aim just enough to send the .45 slug a few inches to one side. So, instead of tearing into Jim Olcott's heart, it creased his ribs. Jim felt its searing burning pain as he thumbed his gun hammer and pulled the trigger again and his second slug hit Lobo Jones in the belly.

Lobo Jones had his second silver mounted six-shooter in his left hand now. Years of practice had made him a deadly shot with either hand. But he was gut-shot, and the fear of death was glazing his staring eyes and he was shooting as fast as he could thumb back the gun hammer and pull the trigger. But all his shots were wild. He was still shooting when their terrified horses collided head-on and piled up in a wild scramble. Dust swirled up to envelope them in a dense, billowing yellow cloud.

Jim Olcott crawled clear of the tangle and staggered to his feet and then stumbled and went down.

Lobo Jones was mortally wounded. He dragged himself clear of the horses as both animals scrambled to their feet and spooked off, bridle reins trailing. He lay there in his own dust-puddled blood, his slitted eyes fixed on Jim Olcott, the silver-mounted six-shooter lifted.

Shod hoofs pounded. Pelon never slacked up. He leaned from his saddle and the heavy blade of his machete swung up and then down, and no Cossack ever made a cleaner saber sweep. Lobo Jones' wolf eyes saw it coming. His hoarse scream of terror was literally cut off as the sharp-edged machete swished and hissed downward and the weight of the blow was carried through by the running momentum of Pelon's horse. Lobo Jones' head was severed at the neck.

Jim Olcott got slowly to his feet, dazed and shaken, his blue eyes staring with horror.

The fighting was over. Not a gringo renegade was left alive, but one. That was Bulger. The big red-whiskered Bulger's nerve had broken. He had thrown away his guns and shouted for mercy and the Santa Margarita Mexicans had swarmed on top of him and taken him prisoner.

Pelon barked quick orders. "Take him around to the adobe wall where brave men have died. Stand him there where Lobo Jones and Bulger and their gringos stood Don Estaban, and other del Castillo men who died bravely. We shall see if this gringo has the courage to die like a man, no?"

The church doors swung open. Margarita del Castillo ran out past Padre Juan and on to where Jim Olcott stood on wide-spread, unsteady legs. She took his arm and he shoved his six-shooter into its holster and walked slowly with her to where Padre Juan stood shepherding his flock of frightened, black-shawled women and huddled, softly sobbing children.

The Bell of Santa Margarita tolled softly in the hush that now followed the fury of the storm. . . .

Months afterward, when the revolution was over and Madero was in power, there was a wedding at the Santa Margarita ranch.

Sam Pringle came down from his Border Club to give away the bride, and Padre Juan performed the marriage ceremony at which Margarita del Castillo became the wife of Jim Olcott. The Captain of the Arizona Rangers was best man.

"It was what I had in mind from the start, Jim," said big Sam Pringle. "But it was a job you had to handle by yourself. . . . The Santa Margarita is yours—yours to hand down to your sons and her sons. . . . It takes a strong man to hold onto the Santa Margarita—strong and brave and honest. You're Irish enough to understand the Mexican people. You're the only man I know who can do it, and Padre Juan agrees with me. My old friend Don Esteban will rest easy now in his grave. . . ."

"*'Sta bueno,*" agreed old Pelon, dressed in his silver-trimmed leather charro clothes. And he went on to perform his important duties as major domo in charge of the great wedding fiesta.

"It is the will of the *Señor Dios,*" old Padre Juan smiled gravely.

Then the old Bell of Santa Margarita rang deep-toned and mellow to send its voice into the mountains and desert of the great Santa Margarita Ranch. . . .

THE END

# COLT KINGS OF THE FIGHTING WEST

BY FOWLER AND CASE

**COMMODORE PERRY OWENS, famous long-haired sheriff of Navajo County, Arizona, wore his silky yellow locks almost down to his waist, but glory-hunters who mistook this idiosyncracy as a sign of weakness were rudely—and quickly—disillusioned. The Commodore was not a good man for a bad man to cross. Although he was unique in that he never smoked, drank or gambled, his accuracy with the two six-shooters he always packed was deadly, and with his .45-60 rifle he was a sure shot up to a mile.**

**ANDY COOPER, whose real name was Blevins and who had been a leader of the Graham clan in the celebrated Graham-Tewksberry feud, had finally come to Holbrook, Arizona, where he had brazenly challenged Owens to "come and get him." Riding into Holbrook, the Commodore was twitted by a crowd at the feed corral for not having arrested Blevins. This hit the sheriff's pride, and he promptly stepped back into his saddle. "All right," he said quietly, "I'll get Andy now."**

**INSIDE the Blevins' one-story wooden house were Andy Cooper, Mrs. Blevins, an older and a younger brother of Andy's, and a Texan named Roberts, also a member of the clan. Commodore Owens rode boldly up to the house, jerked his rifle from its saddle boot, and advanced to the front porch on foot. He knocked, and after a long silence Andy Cooper opened a side door just a crack, peering out. "What do you want?" he asked belligerently, and the Commodore tersely answered, "You." Andy said, "All right; I'll come," and then abruptly slammed the door. In the next instant, a bullet came through the panel.**

**THE SHERIFF shot back twice and Andy fell, mortally wounded. A moment later the older brother ran around the side of the house. He shot and missed, and Owens knocked him out with his first shot. Roberts then dashed out, six-shooter raised, but before he could use it the Commodore shot him dead. Mrs. Blevins now came to the door and begged the sheriff not to shoot the younger brother, who was only sixteen. "Ma'am," Owens said, "he's got a gun," and just then the boy raised it. The Commodore was forced to shoot him, and the shot was fatal. Only the older brother survived. The Commodore lived to a ripe old age in the strife-torn land he had cleared of outlaws.**

# BRING

Steve pivoted as Ritchie charged him.

**"For bringing back a murderous killer, you fired me," Steve Boyd told that iron-jawed Ranger, Cap McCloud. "Now you come begging me to save your ranch. I'll do it—but for a price that you'll never be big enough—nor man enough—to pay!"**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Arson or Accident?

STEVE BOYD stood with the skillet in his hand, his copper-red head cocked to one side, wondering. Horses were coming from the direction of the C in a Box. He wasn't expecting trouble, but five years in the Texas Rangers had taught him that trouble popped up when you least expected it. He set the pan on the back of the stove and was buckling on his gunbelt when from the darkness came the voice of Cap McCloud.

"Steve Boyd—you home?" The voice was curt, gravelly.

As he stepped to the doorway, his heart picked up a faster beat. He silently cursed himself. Suppose Stacey was with the old wart hog? Stacey McCloud meant nothing to him!

Wondering what brought them, he invited, "Come in."

Stacey gave him the briefest of smiles. He gave her back a stiff nod. This, he was thinking, was the girl Mark Brandon had his black eyes set on. Mark Brandon, the county sheriff, thought he was quite a hand with the

# 'EM BACK DEAD!

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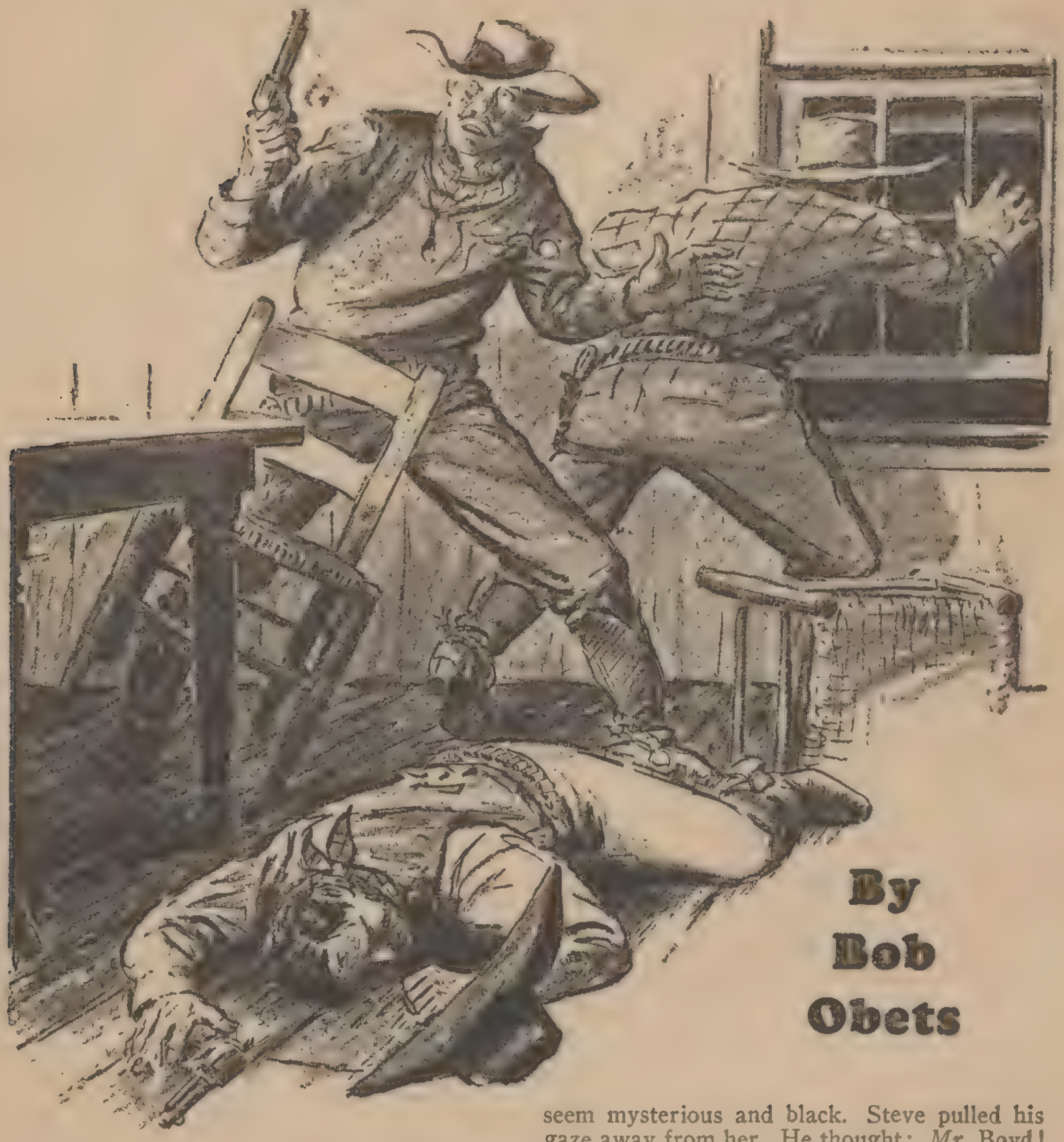

**By Bob Obets**

women! Maybe, come election day, Mark Brandon wouldn't be so cock-sure of himself.

Steve slid out his extra chair. He almost winced when Stacey murmured, "Thank you, Mr. Boyd."

She had on a blue dress with a bonnet to match. The dress had a tight bodice which fitted her firm young breasts in a way that plumb aggravated a man. The perky blue bonnet threw her eyes in shadow and made them seem mysterious and black. Steve pulled his gaze away from her. He thought: *Mr.* Boyd!

The old wart hog cleared his throat. "Steve, how you figure the election will go?"

"Everybody knows Mark Brandon is Fount Ritchie's man. Fount Ritchie gives the orders, and he's got his finger in every pie in the county. Folks want a sheriff who will do his own thinkin'. Folks are gettin' fed up with Brandon and Fount Ritchie both."

"In other words," said McCloud, "you figure you or me, one, will be elected. That's

what I come over to see you about, Steve."

Steve got out the makings and rolled a cigarette, his gray eyes staring at the man who, for three of his five years in the Ranger service, had been his captain. He wondered what was coming. He wondered if, after what had happened, McCloud would have the crust to ask any favor of him.

McCloud sighed. "Steve, I overstepped myself when I bought the C in a Box. I had four thousand in cash—money I'd saved from fifteen years of Rangerin'. I knew I was bitin' off too big a chunk, but when I first set eyes on the place—well, you know how it is, Steve. I wanted Stacey to have a real home—no more of this livin' in Ranger camps and 'dobe towns along the Rio Grande. I saw that ranch, and it was just what I wanted. So—" He stopped, his puckered blue eyes staring moodily at the mud-chinked wall.

Steve knew how it was, all right. Not so long ago he could remember wanting to own a real home, too—with Stacey in it.

He said: "So you put up a down-payment on the C in a Box, and Fount Ritchie's bank holds paper for the rest. Where I bought my three thousand acres for cash, unimproved, you had to buy three times that acreage, with all improvements. Now Fount Ritchie is pinchin' you, and you come to me. What do you think I can do?"

McCloud's head came up. "Not any favor," he growled. "If I should withdraw from the sheriff's race, you'd ought to win it. I came to offer a swap."

"I think I'm going to win, regardless," Steve said, and heard Stacey's murmur.

"Such confidence!"

Steve never looked at her. He said, "Let's hear it, McCloud."

"My next payment on the ranch falls due a month from tomorrow, Steve. Ritchie's cashier claims the drought has got the whole country in a bad way, includin' the bank. He won't extend the time. My only chance to pull out is them horses of mine. I went to San Antone and found me a buyer—a Cuban feller who'll take maybe a hundred head at fifty dollars a round. That adds up to five thousand dollars, Steve. That would save the ranch for Stacey and me, and leave us a little money over for operatin' expenses."

"I still can't see," said Steve, "where I come in."

"The buyer won't take those horses, Steve, unless they're broke right. He gives me a month. He's coming down from San Antone to inspect 'em, and bringin' the money with him. If those horses don't suit him, I'm sunk. And that little Cuban is a man who knows horses!"

"That's a lot of money," Steve said, "and not much time to get the horses ready in. But what's all that got to do with me, Captain?"

"You're the best hand with horses I know of," McCloud said simply. "You come over to my place and take charge of shapin' up them horses, and I'll withdraw from the sheriff's race. That's it, Steve. The time is short. I don't know of another man in the country who could get those horses ready in a month. If you'll help me."

STEVE stood up. He said, almost gently, "There was a time, Captain, when I hoped you'd help me. There was a time when I was your lieutenant—remember? I followed Enrique Thompson into Mexico, because he was a killer and a skunk. I brought him out of there, too. For that, the powers that be hauled you up on the carpet, and you came back to camp and fired me. You spouted off about discipline and International Law. You—"

"Steve!" Stacey cried hotly. She was on her feet, her eyes almost glaring at him. "You don't know what you're talking about, Steve Boyd! You listen to me, and I'll tell you! Dad did all he—"

"Hush, Stacey," McCloud told her. "We might as well go. Come along."

He took Stacey's arm, but she held back a moment. She gave Steve a bright-eyed stare.

"Steve! I never thought—"

Then she whirled and almost ran from the room.

McCloud followed her, carrying himself stiffly erect—a beaten man, Steve thought, but a proud man. Old Joe McCloud was tough!

Steve shoved a fresh mesquite chunk in the stove. He sliced off some bacon, set it to broiling in the skillet, and warmed up the coffee. When everything was ready, he found he wasn't hungry. He sat at the kitchen table, drinking black coffee from a tin cup. He asked himself why he came here to buy a ranch, in the first place. Then he muttered, "The old vinegaroon!"

Stacey—she was the reason. Oh, he had looked at a lot of places, but the grass here looked greener. The good curly mesquite grass that ran over the ridge and across the prickly-pear flat, to the whitewashed adobe where Stacey McCloud lived.

Well, he might as well forget about Stacey. It made a good dream. All those lonesome nights in the brush, the gunsmoke, the violence. A man could endure those things when he had something to look forward to. Stacey—she had filled his mind for four years.

Whatever Joe McCloud had done to him, he didn't hold it against Stacey. It was the way she treated him that hurt—like he was the dirt under her feet.

Steve got up and carried the lamp into the

other room. He sat on the edge of his bunk, pulled off one boot and thought: "Anyway, it was a fair proposition. Without Joe McCloud in the race, I'd be elected sheriff, sure as shootin'."

He pulled off the other boot, grunting a bit, and reflected:

"I could look after my few cows, in between times. Sheriff's job would sure help to tide me over this drought. And wouldn't it flute Ritchie and Mark Brandon!"

Hurriedly, he began pulling his boots back on.

Riding toward the C in a Box, he began to feel in better spirits. He began to wish he'd eaten some supper. He was just thinking of beating Mark Brandon, was all. Stacey McCloud and that old wart hog were the furtherest thing from his mind.

He rode across the ridge, across the prickly-pear flat. He started through the belt of mesquite, beyond the flat, and saw a rider coming toward him. The rider, as Steve sighted him, swung his horse off the trail and went crashing through the thorny brush, carrying something on his saddle that made a clattering, banging noise.

Steve stared after the man until the brush swallowed him. When he faced back toward the C in a Box, he noticed a faint red glow above the mesquite tops. By the time his horse had carried him through the belt of brush, the glow had grown to a fierce blaze that licked red tongues up at the sky. He saw with relief that it wasn't the ranch house burning. It was the old wart hog's big barn.

The barn was a goner! Stacey and the old man, a little way from it, stood watching it burn. As Steve pulled up and swung down, they both turned to stare at him. In the red glare, McCloud's seamy face looked harsh and old. The old tarantula! Man almost felt sorry for him.

Stacey took an impulsive step toward him, then stopped, her eyes holding a poignant hurt that made Steve want to comfort her.

"Why, Steve? Why would anyone do this to us?"

"The fire was set," McCloud said woodenly. "You could smell the coal oil, Steve. By the time we saw the blaze from the house, it was too late."

Steve still didn't understand. He saw the blankets smouldering on the ground. His eyes lifted from them and took in the scorched, fire-blackened appearance of the two who confronted him. McCloud's eyebrows were brown crisps; Stacy wore a red brand where a falling ember had touched her face. Steve could imagine them beating at the flames with those futile blankets, and he asked, "Did the barn mean so much? Surely—"

They all turned as three men rode up and swung from saddle—Fount Ritchie, the sheriff, Mark Brandon, and a man named Swanson, who was Brandon's deputy. At a murmured word from Fount Ritchie, he and Mark Brandon came forward, leaving Swanson to hold the horses.

McCloud gave the pair a brief nod, and went on: "It was the hay and the grain they wanted to destroy, Steve. We've had no rain for a year. I've kept my horse stock on the best grass I've got, but they're not sleek. They don't have that glossy look. I bought that feed with my last dollars. It would have brought those horses up to top shape. Now—" McCloud's voice hardened. "Seve, somebody aims to stop that horse sale. Somebody aims to ruin me. And I guess they'll do it. But by the eternal, they'll regret it!"

"But why?" Stacey asked again. "Why would anybody want to ruin us? This ranch —it all means so much—"

HER voice stopped on a poignant note, but Steve knew what was in her mind. Joe McCloud was too old for the long trails, the cold night camps deep in the brush. He had served the best years of his life as a Ranger, and Steve had to admit that he'd been a good

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one. He had saved his meager pay and he had put it all into this ranch, hoping to provide a good home for Stacey, hoping to rest up a bit and work with the horses he loved and find solid comfort in the afternoon of his life.

Those were some of the things in Stacey's mind, and now she saw them being torn away. The thought of her loss and of her hurt brought a slow, savage anger that rose up in Steve Boyd like the rising of an ocean's tide.

He said, with that savageness roweling him: "In the Rangers, Stacey, a man always looks first for the motives, and the motive here seems clear. The feed was for Cap's horses, and the horses were to meet the ranch payment. Somebody wants to make sure the payment won't be met. If it isn't, the ranch goes to the bank. Fount Ritchie owns the bank. So he gets the ranch. It's as simple as that, Stacey."

Steve, as he spoke, was not looking at Stacey. He had stepped a bit to one side so that he faced Fount Ritchie and Mark Brandon; and he stood poised and ready for any move either of them might make.

He saw the black shine of Mark Brandon's eyes, the half sardonic, half angry curl that pulled at his thick lips. He saw the way Ritchie, who was a heavier, softer man than Brandon, settled himself and thrust his big head forward, drawing in one final lungful of smoke from the cigar clenched between his teeth. Then he tossed the cigar away. His voice came, curiously soft and gentle as a woman's.

"That would be a motive, Boyd—for a poor man. But I can think of a stronger one. You hate Joe McCloud, because you think he got you fired from the Rangers. You might want to ruin him. Didn't you learn that in the Rangers too, Boyd—that hate is the strongest motive of all?"

Steve heard Stacey's breath come in sharply. He heard Mark Brandon's jeering laugh. He looked at Joe McCloud and he spoke directly to him. Somehow, in this moment, McCloud's opinion of him seemed important.

"Cap, do you believe that? You know me. You have stood beside me and ridden beside me when things were tough. Do you believe, Cap, that I'd stab a man in the back?"

They stood there in the dying red fire glow, staring at each other, measuring each other. Then, though he couldn't be certain, it seemed to Steve that his old captain grew a bit straighter. Some of the harshness went away from his face, and in its place came a new determination, implacable as flint.

"I know you better than that, Steve," he said simply. "God knows you'd never stab any man in the back."

"Then," said Steve with satisfaction, "I'll say what needs sayin' to this pair!" And his lean body at once seemed to gather itself. His hand spread so that the thumb touched his gunbelt, and his eyelids crept together and through the slits between the lids he watched Ritchie and Mark Brandon. The words he spoke were deceptive, for beneath their softness lay a hint of chilled steel.

"Starting as now, gentlemen, I'm working for Joe McCloud. Riding over here, I near ran into a fellow wearin' a hat that looked black in the moonlight—black as that hat Swanson, there, is wearin' now. That fellow was carrying a can with him, a coal oil can, I expect, that banged and rattled in the brush. The next little incident like that that happens, somebody is going to get shot. The only reason somebody doesn't get shot right now is that I'm not sure of my man. Do I make myself clear, gentlemen?"

Mark Brandon uttered an oath. He took a quick step forward; but Ritchie put a hand on his arm.

"McCloud," he said smoothly, "I hope you're not taken in by Boyd's wild talk. Believe me, I want to help you. I want to be a neighbor. If you need me, call on me."

"He's called on you, once," Steve said coldly, "and yo' bank turned him down cold. Now maybe you better be ridin' on along, Ritchie."

"I don't make threats," said Ritchie in his gentle voice. "I don't make threats—and nobody pushes me around. Come along, Mark."

Mark Brandon gave Steve a long stare. "Some other time, my friend," he murmured, and turned and walked with Fount Ritchie to their horses. They swung into saddle, Ritchie grunting a little, and the three men rode away.

"Did you mean that, Steve? About helpin' me?" Joe McCloud asked.

Steve didn't answer immediately. Steve was watching Stacey, and the way she was looking back at him—it set all those dreams stirring again in his head.

"You're damned right I meant it!" he said.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Undercurrents

A HUNDRED horses to break in a month's time! Steve and the two vaqueros he hired, Felipe and Pantaleon, worked the sun up and worked it down. A constant haze of dust hung over the breaking corral, working into the men's eyes and lungs; and the pounding of iron-hard hoofs and the screaming and squealing of enraged, frightened horses became a familiar blend of sounds.

Old Joe McCloud and his one cowhand, a man named Manders, kept the wild horses coming in from the thickets, culling out the sorry ones as they found them. Stacey took care of the kitchen, cooking for all the men, yet snatching a few minutes now and then to perch herself on the corral fence and watch the breaking.

Steve's method was a simple one. First, an old beaten-up, double-rigged saddle without stirrups was strapped on the walley-eyed candidate, and then he was allowed to pitch and roll until sheer exhaustion stopped him and he decided that the hated thing on his back was there to stay. Before he could change his mind, a breaking saddle was slapped on him and Steve or one of the vaqueros stepped aboard the beast. Then the fun began!

In that round, mesquite-pole corral, as the days rolled on, it was man against horse, human endurance against animal endurance. Horses sunfished and reared and pawed at the sky. A big sorrel threw Pantaleon so hard that he was laid up for two days. A barrel-chested grulla slammed against the fence, and knocked Stacey to the ground outside; Felipe, who was riding the grulla, came near to getting a broken leg.

Steve himself met his match in a big red roan. Three times Steve hit the dust. But the fourth time he stepped into saddle, he stayed there. He named the horse "Booger Red," and the breaking went on.

At nights Steve was too tired to do more than plow through his supper and head for his bunk. That's where he was heading the night Joe McCloud stopped him.

"Come morning', Stacey and me are going to town," McCloud said. "I'm going to make one more try at gettin' some feed to gloss up them horses. Also, I'm going to put a notice in the county newspaper stating that I'm no longer a candidate for sheriff."

"Puttin' that aside for the moment," Steve told him, "there's one thing I want to know. The day in camp when you fired me, you told me you'd appreciate it if I'd stay away from Stacey. Do you still feel that way about me?"

McCloud looked uncomfortable. "I—well, you're doing me a good turn, Steve—"

"Cut that," Steve said sharply. "We made a deal. That's why I'm helping you."

"Well, then, Steve, I'll say this: I don't know. I told you to stay away from her because I didn't think you were the right man. Not another Ranger in my command would have crossed into Mexico without orders. But not many men," he added with the hint of a smile, "could bring Enrique Thompson back, wherever they found him. That's how you were, Steve—headstrong and reckless and


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don't-give-a-damn. Since you quit—since you're out of the Rangers—you seem to have changed. But I'm not sure, Steve."

"Do you want Stacey to marry some milksop?" Steve demanded with a touch of bitterness. "Some clabber-kneed feller that anybody can push around?"

"I wasn't any milksop when I married Stacey's mother, Steve. Fact is, I was a great deal like you. When I got signed on with the Rangers, I thought I had the world by the tail! But it's hell on a woman, Steve. Never having a roof to call her own, never knowin' if her man will come back all in one piece or strapped to his saddle. I want Stacey to have something better than that. All I got out of Rangerin' was a few bullet scars and the money I put into this ranch. If I lose the ranch," he added wryly, "all I'll have left is the scars."

"You haven't lost the ranch—yet," Steve reminded him. "Which makes me think. It ever strike you as strange that a rich feller like Ritchie should be so hell-bent to get hold of this ranch?"

"Sayin' he does want the ranch, Steve. Sayin' he was the one responsible for my barn burning. This ranch is a valuable property. I paid three thousand down on it, and the bank would be that much to the good. Isn't that reason enough for Ritchie wantin' the C in a Box?"

"Nope. Not bad enough that he'd set fire to your barn. The way I figure it, Cap, it isn't the ranch Ritchie's after. It's you. He didn't want you to come to this country, in the first place. But he couldn't stop you. You could have got some other bank to finance you. So Ritchie decided his best bet was to keep a hold on you by lettin' his bank carry your ranch papers. He likely figured he could take the ranch away from you, bust you, and you'd leave the country. Your runnin' for sheriff has put a crimp in that plan, because if you're elected you'll stay here, whether you lose the ranch or not. So now Ritchie's figurin' from another angle."

"If Ritchie had my barn burned," McCloud said grimly, "it looks mighty like he's still figurin' to take my ranch."

"YOU withdraw from the sheriff's race, and he'll take the ranch, sure as shootin'," Steve declared. "That way, he'd get you out of the country. But if you stay and get elected, Ritchie will do the next best thing. He'll try to get on your good side, try to get you under obligation to him. Maybe, he'll even extend that note."

"I don't savvy it, Steve. Why should Ritchie want me out of the country?"

"Because," Steve said, "you had the reputation of being the keenest man-hunter in the business. Ritchie owns the sheriff. This country is far enough from the Border that the Rangers mostly leave it alone. Put it this way, Cap. Suppose you were an old sheep-killin' wolf that had found some nice quiet spot, and was fixin' to relax and enjoy yo'self, when up pops a big ugly dog? Sorta spoil your playhouse, wouldn't it? I'm thinkin' that's the way Ritchie feels now."

"You ought to've said two dogs, then," McCloud told him. "He'll be after you, too, Steve."

"You've had the experience and the rep and the brains," Steve said, somewhat ruefully. "Me—well, like you said, I run more to burnin' my powder, and to hell with whether it's dry or not. Cap, you got yo' old black book anywheres around? I'd kinda like to look over that list of fugitives from justice."

"I've got it and a batch of reward dodgers, besides. By Jerusalem, Steve, maybe you've got something!"

"Do me one favor, then," Steve requested soberly. "Don't withdraw from the sheriff's race—at least not yet. See what happens."

"I'm gunna give you the worst lickin' a candidate ever got. But if you're askin' for it—" And McCloud almost grinned.

"You might win the race, Cap. But you're apt to lose something else," Steve retorted. He walked to the door and stopped there and looked back. "You're apt to lose yo' daughter, Cap. Go sleep that over!"

He strolled on out to the porch and down to its end where the clay water jar hung. He didn't notice Stacey, sitting on the vine-shadowed end of the porch, until she spoke.

"Is something about to happen to me, Steve? Should I get out my wedding gown, or would something in black be more appropriate?"

He saw the white blur of her face tipped up toward him. He had the dipper in his hand and he tilted his head and drank; then he refilled and drank the dipper dry again, the cool water going down with a little gurgle of sound.

"Like a horse!" Stacey said.

"I work like one and I smell like one. Why, I'm even beginnin' to sprout sorrel hair on my chest. Of course I sound like a horse," Steve said, and he went over and sat on the edge of the porch, beside her. "I'm feelin' like a frisky colt in a mesquite grass pasture!"

"Steve!"—half laughing. "What's got into you?"

"For one thing, I've found out what's been eatin' Cap. He hasn't been so sore at me, Stacey. He just wants you to have the moon with a gold rim around it. He just wants you to have a good steady husband who will provide for you, and not go gallivantin' off on

some gun trail and leave you to worry yo'self sick. Funny I never saw how he felt before, Stacey. I guess I was the wildest, craziest danged Ranger in his outfit, and no wonder he didn't want me for a son-in-law. Now that I think about it straight, I can even see why he had to fire me. But all this wild stuff's over with, Stacey. I've got a ranch now, and it's paid for. So all I need is a little luck, and—"

He turned and put his hands on her shoulders, pulling her around to face him. A hoarseness came in his voice as he asked: "Stacey, would you? It'll mean waiting. I haven't even got a house built yet—not one fit for a wife to live in. I had that reward money from capturin' Tony Galvan, and that's what I bought the place with. I haven't got it a third stocked, and with the drought—well, it'll take some time, Stacey. Would you wait? Do you think anything of me at all, Stacey?"

They were both standing now, and she was looking up at him, so close to him that he could feel the steady throbbing of her heart. He wanted to take her in his arms. He wanted to kiss her, to crush her lips against his. But in this moment a shyness had come over him, and he waited for her answer and it was worse than any waiting he had ever known—worse, even, than the time in Mexico, when he had stood in that miserable cantina facing Enrique Thompson, knowing that if Enrique offered resistance he would never take the man out of there. . . .

Stacey said softly, almost breathlessly: "Steve, you're such a fool! Don't you know that when the right man comes along, a girl doesn't want to wait? A girl worth her salt, Steve, wants to be with her man and help him and watch him grow. . . . Good night, Steve."

And before he could stop her, she had pulled away from him and was running along the porch. He followed slowly, and there was a singing inside him, and once he laughed aloud.

"My God," he said, "does it hit a man this way? I feel like my feet was feathers and all they're touchin' is air!"

He was happier than he could ever remember being. He wanted to get to bed, for now he could dream again. Something like irritation came in his eyes when, on his dresser, he saw Joe McCloud's black book and a stack of yellowed reward dodgers.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Dead-End Trail

STEVE, at first, didn't know what had waked him, but from long habit he came awake instantly. He was pulling on his boots when the voice of Jake Manders, McCloud's ranch hand, called suddenly to him again.

"Boyd! You awake, Boyd?"

Before he opened the door Steve knew there was trouble. Jumbled thoughts flashed through his head. Overslept, damn it! Should have been on guard. Whatever was wrong, Mark Brandon and Fount Ritchie were behind it. Had a little surprise for Ritchie and Company, one of these days! Wasn't sure about Manders, either.

Manders' heavy white face, that never seemed to brown or blister from the sun, made a vague blur in the grayness.

"Old Man and Miss Stacey done left for town, so I thought I'd better tell you, Boyd. It's them vaqueros. 'Leon and Felipe—they've skipped out."

"Skipped out?" Steve repeated, and a distinct shock ran through him.

Outside of himself possibly, those vaqueros were the best hands with horses in the country. He could hire more men, but they wouldn't savvy horses the way that pair did. He and 'Leon and Felipe were a team; they had learned to work together. Two weeks to go, and fifty head to break! With Felipe and 'Leon to help him, he might have met the dead-line. But without them. . . .

"Did they say anything? Did you hear anything, Manders?"

"You know me," Manders said, chuckling. "Sleep like a log. I just woke up and they were gone. Bet they're Border-jumpers, anyhow. You ask me, they're crossin' the Rio Grande, by now! They been grumblin' about you sweatin' 'em so hard."

Steve strode out to the long adobe where the ranch hands slept, with Manders trailing him. The pale light of the hanging lantern showed him the vaqueros' bunks bare of bedrolls. Their warbags were gone; everything.

Steve was turning away when he noticed the rawhide reata hanging on a wall peg opposite Felipe's bunk. His gray eyes grew smoky and black, and when he turned them on Manders something in them made the man take a step backward.

"So you sleep like a log?" He said it gently, taking a step forward. "Manders, you're a liar. Felipe might have forgotten his shirt, unless it was buttoned on him. But he never would have forgot that reata. He spent hours plaitin' it and shapin' it and workin' it in his hands to make it supple. That reata was the apple of his eyes. He never forgot it. He was *taken* from here—him an' Leon, both. And when they was taken, Manders, they made a fuss. Damn you"—he took another step—"you heard the racket. And you lied because you're in on it!"

"I never! I'm not!" Manders squawked. "I remember now. I couldn't sleep. I—"

"You, Manders? You sleep like a log." Another step. "Remember, Manders?"

Manders gave a yell. He broke for the door, and almost reached it. He was close enough to touch the door, when Steve caught him and whirled him and slammed him against the wall.

"You'd better talk, Manders. I'm not foolin'."

"Some men came in," Manders gasped. "They hog-tied and gagged them Mexicans. And they told me if I moved outta this bunk-house before daylight, they'd kill me. I—honest to God, Steve, that's everything I know!"

"Who were the men?" Steve gave Manders a shake that slammed his head against the wall.

"They—they were masked. I was half asleep. Honest, Steve! That's all I know!"

"Think some more!"

"Steve! Before God—!"

"Ah, you whinin' dog," Steve said disgustedly. He shoved Manders away from him, and went out the door.

He saddled a horse and then spent an hour riding a slow circle in the brush, around the ranch buildings. He leaned in the saddle, studying the sun-baked ground until he got a crick in his back.

There was plenty of horse sign, for Joe McCloud and Manders had been keeping their saddles warm, driving up the wild horses to be broken. But though Steve possessed a pair of keen eyes and, in the Rangers, had become a fair hand at reading sign, he was not able to pick up the trail of any particular group of horses leading away from the building.

He followed one set of tracks, made by two horses, for perhaps a quarter of a mile. Then the tracks led him up a black-brush ridge.

McCloud and Manders, he told himself, going up to this vantage point to look the brush over for horses. He let his own horse blow a minute, and was ready to go back down the ridge when he saw Manders riding through the brush. The man kept glancing back over his shoulders. Suddenly Steve grinned.

"Don't know where I went," he murmured. "Figures maybe I picked up the trail, and is going to warn his buddies!"

HE SPURRED on down the ridge and fell in behind Manders, keeping far enough back so that the man wasn't likely to spot him. Now and then he could catch a glimpse of the man's head and shoulders, bobbing through the mesquite. Manders made a half-circle and then headed out due south.

That way lay the big Running R, which belonged to Fount Ritchie. And the Running R. Steve decided, was Manders' destination!

Perhaps a mile from the Running R headquarters, Manders turned left, to follow Dead Man's Creek, and Steve could guess where the man would lead him. He was not mistaken. Years ago, mustang hunters had built a brush-and-mud shack in a bend of the creek, and there Manders stopped.

Steve watched him tie his horse in the edge of the brush, then got down and tied his own animal. Here along the creek the brush was almost impenetrable. Steve heard voices coming from the shack, before he got close enough to make out its squat, dun shape. He went on with more caution, stopping only when he reached a windowless wall. He could hear the voices plainly now.

"Well, I warned you," the growling voice of Manders was saying. "I don't think he could trail you here, but that Steve Boyd is hell on horseback, even if the Rangers did fire him! Damn it, Boots, you hadn't oughta've hit that Mexican so hard! S'pose he dies? He looks like he's in a bad way, to me."

"You do what I tell you!" the man called Boots snarled. "I sent Scotty to find the boss, four hours ago. The whole thing is a mess. Damn it, Manders, get going! Go tell the boss what happened, and see what he wants done."

"The boss ain't gonna like this," Manders growled. "If that Mexican dies. . . . My God, s'pose Boyd gets onto this?"

"Shut up!" Boots snarled. "And don't forget we're all in this together. Go find the boss."

Manders mutttered something that Steve couldn't quite catch, then heard Manders go slogging back toward his horse. He went quietly on around the shack and waited there until he heard the sound of hoofbeats. Then he slid through the back door with his gun in his hand.

Pantaleon saw Steve first. The Mexican sat with his back propped against the wall. His hands were tied behind him, his scuffed boots held one against the other by several wraps of stout rope. He was not gagged, but he made no sound as he saw Steve come through the doorway. He watched Steve steadily, his dark eyes beginning to brighten.

The man Manders had called Boots stood with his back toward Steve, looking out the doorway. He was a hulking big fellow; and some sound, the scrape of Steve's boots, brought him around. He moved with the easy grace peculiar to some large men, his hand going to his six-shooter and half drawing it and then stopping the motion.

Steve's eyes had lifted from the sprawled body of Felipe, on the rammed-earth floor beside 'Leon, half covered by a bright red and green blanket. His eyes were staring at Boots, steady and unwinking and black from the

emotion that gripped him. His mind retained the image, the picture of Felipe with his scalp laid open from the brutal blow that had left him senseless; and he was remembering the vaquero songs Felipe loved to sing, the gentle way he had with a horse, the loyalty and the courage of the simple Mexican man.

With a sudden, savage motion, Steve jammed his gun back in its holster. He saw the little spasm, half of fear and half of hope, which tightened the big man's face. Words came from his throat with a raw, rasping sound.

"I ought to shoot you through the belly. You're due no more chance than you gave Felipe. But that would be too easy. You can't beat me, but I want to see you try it. I want to see the fear in your eyes when you fail. You've got yo' hand on that iron. Pull it! Damn you, draw!"

Steve saw the change, the flare of triumph that lit the man's face. He realized he was in trouble, even before 'Leon cried a warning.

"Esteban! *Quidado!*"

STEVE whirled and drew and shot, almost in the same motion. The man in the doorway behind him—Scotty, he supposed— had his gun ready. He, too, was a big man; his wide, loose mouth dropped open in a foolish way as Steve's slug crashed through his chest. His hastily snapped shot went between Steve's left arm and his body, raking his ribs and setting his arm muscles to stinging. Steve whipped back around, expecting to see the muzzle of Boots' gun covering him, expecting to feel the shock of lead.

Boots had run for it! Steve charged across to the front door in time to see Boots go crashing away through the brush. In a few moments he heard the sound of a horse being spurred into a headlong run. It was not until then, with the battle heat cooling in him, that Steve cursed himself for an idiot.

He went over and took a look; but Scotty was dead. He had bungled the whole thing. He had let the man escape who had gun-whipped Felipe. He had killed Scotty, and he hadn't found out anything. Fount Ritchie was boss of this outfit—he would bet his boots on that—but he had no proof. Well, he told himself grimly, maybe there would be another time. No use to wait here, for Boots would spill the news of what had happened. Besides, he had to get Felipe back to the ranch and get a doctor for him.

Steve found tied in the brush the two horses 'Leon and Felipe had been brought here on—horses wearing brands unfamiliar to him. He and 'Leon tied Felipe on one of the saddles. The dead man, Scotty, they left in the shack. Steve was a little sick as they rode away, in his mind the thought that human life was a precious thing. He had taken Scotty's life from him; and now if Felipe died, he might have to take another life. One thing, though, was certain. If Felipe died, his murderer would be brought to justice.

They reached the C in a Box in the middle of the afternoon. Stacey and McCloud had not returned from town. Manders was not around, and Steve guessed he wouldn't show up again. He and 'Leon carried Felipe to the bunkhouse where among Manders' belongings, Steve found paper and a pencil. He wrote a brief message.

"Take it to the depot," he told 'Leon, "and have the telegrapher send it for me. But start the doctor out here first. And you might notify the coroner about the dead feller."

'Leon went running.

Steve heated some water in the kitchen. He was back in the bunkhouse, cleansing Felipe's wound, when a voice called, "Where is everybody?" and Fount Ritchie came bringing the fragrance of his rich cigar through the doorway.

"Say!" he exclaimed softly. "What happened to him?"

The man, Steve decided, was a good actor. But maybe, if he felt Ritchie out a bit—?

"That," said Steve grimly, "is what I intend to find out. I shook part of the truth out of Manders, then trailed him to that mustangers' shack on Dead Man's Creek. I left a fellow named Scotty there, dead. The other one, Boots, ran like a scared rabbit. But I'll find him—and then there's always Manders to work on." He gave Ritchie a sharp look. "What I want is the boss, the man who gives the orders. I think, when I find him, some folks around here are going to get a surprise."

"How so?" Ritchie asked. He rolled the cigar between his lips, his heavy face bland, his eyes watchful.

Steve set the basin of water beside the bunk, straightened and let anger show on his face.

"Ritchie, I figured you were mixed up in this dirty work. It looks like I was mistaken, so I don't mind tellin' you. It looks like I've been mistaken in several things. McCloud got me fired from the Rangers, because he was jealous of me. Then, after that, I was fool enough to come here and try to help him save his ranch! I came here on account of Stacey, and now it looks like she and the old man have made a fool of me again!"

"I—" Ritchie couldn't quite conceal his smile. "I don't follow you, Boyd."

"Stacey's been playin' me along so's I'd help the old man," Steve growled. "While all along she's in love with Mark Brandon. She figures to marry him, and Brandon is a damned crook!"

"Those are strong words, Boyd. Mark

Brandon is the county sheriff. And he's—"

"He won't be for long!" Steve flung out furiously. "I've sent a wire to the sheriff at Dodge City. Mark Brandon's real name is Brant Markham. He's a gambler—owned a saloon in Dodge durin' the palmy days. He cheated a Texas drover out of a bunch of money, then killed the man when he protested. That's who your sheriff is! And that's who Stacey figures to marry—and make a fool of me again."

Fount Ritchie said carefully. "Then you don't like the McClouds?"

"Would you?" Steve demanded. "The old man got me fired. And now the girl's playing me for a chump. No, I don't like him nor his butter-mouthed daughter, neither!"

*"Well,"* Ritchie said softly. "Maybe you're the man I better talk to, instead of McCloud."

Steve's little stratagem was working! Steve began feeling pretty good—until, looking past Ritchie's shoulder, he saw the white face of Stacey McCloud.

A little pudgy man with waxed mustaches stood beside her, just outside the doorway. How long they had been standing there Steve couldn't know.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Cautious Colts!

BROWN-SKINNED Felipe was a tough breed. In two days he was sitting up. In a couple more days he was up and about. No concussion! The doctor shook his head and marveled. At the end of a week, when Steve refused to let Felipe go back to helping bust broncs, Felipe saddled his horse and rode away southward. In answer to Steve's questions he only grinned.

"I be back, Esteban." And that was all he would say.

Joe McCloud began to look more and more worried. The feed store in Grass Valley refused to let him have credit. He found it impossible to hire men to replace Manders and Felipe. The hand of Fount Ritchie was against him, and Ritchie was a power in this country.

Surprisingly, Señor Montevedeo, the horse buyer, rode each day with Joe McCloud, combing the brush for horses for Steve and 'Leon to break. He explained that, due to heavy beef shipments to Cuba, he had been lucky to make arrangements to ship a hundred head of horses. The boat sailed on the first and if he failed to have his horses aboard it, he would forfeit the money he had put up to hold space on it, besides having to wait perhaps a month for another boat.

So, the señor said, he had come to the C in a Box early, to make things clear. He had found more horses near San Antonio—a precaution in case the Señor McCloud could not meet the dead-line.

A week to go, and thirty more horses to break! Steve and 'Leon worked from sunup till sundown. On moonlight nights, after supper, they hit the saddle again. Steve told 'Leon that if he got any thinner he could use a double-barreled shotgun for a pair of chaps. 'Leon looked at Steve and grinned, then muttered something about Steve's clothes fitting like the garments of a scarecrow. It was that morning that disaster struck.

Steve wasn't thinking much about the bay he was riding. For the first time in a week, Stacey was perched on the corral fence, and Steve was thinking about her. He was wondering, for the hundredth time, how much of his talk with Fount Ritchie she had overheard. At first, he had intended to explain that, but when she pointedly avoided him a stubbornness grew in him. If she could believe so easily that he was a snake in the grass, let her think what she pleased! Still, the sight of her made a man's heart act up. Tonight, he promised, he would talk with Stacey.

He slapped his hat against the bay's flanks and yelled, "Go it, boy!" And at that moment he felt himself shooting upward, with the saddle still under him. He realized that his cinch strap must have broken.

He fell hard, on his left side. He heard a sound like the snapping of a dry stick. When he sat up, Stacey was on her knees beside him, saying, "Steve! Oh, Steve, your arm!" Then he felt the pain.

His first thought was for those thirty horses. The pain angered him, and the feeling of defeat was like salt on a wound. He said almost savagely, "Well, I tried—no matter what you think. And no matter if Joe McCloud did get me fired!"

Joe McCloud took one look at Steve's arm and groaned. Then his puckered eyes blazed fiercely.

"I guess this whips me, Steve, but I'm going down fightin'. I'm going to hire me some men, or know the reason why!"

He saddled up and headed for town. When he returned it was nearly dark, and the doctor he had sent to the ranch had already set Steve's arm and gone back to town. McCloud looked so old and beaten that Steve couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

"Ritchie's got every man in the country in debt or scared of him, Steve. I never thought I'd see the day when a fellow like Ritchie could dictate to even one Texas man! How's the arm?"

"Hurts," Steve grunted. "Who's that coming, Cap?"

McCloud went out to the porch, and Steve heard the smooth voice of Fount Ritchie.

"Heard you have a spot of trouble, Mc-

Cloud. Seems like we better have a little talk."

Steve sat on the edge of the bed. The room seemed to whirl around him. When the whirling stopped, he got up and went to the door and listened to the murmur of Ritchie's voice.

". . . That's how it stacks up, McCloud. Looks like you won't be able to meet that payment, but I'm not a greedy man—I don't want you to suffer. I'll give you six thousand in cash for the work and the money you've put in here, and the bank takes over the ranch. I figure that's more than fair."

"What's the string tied to it?" McCloud blurted hoarsely.

"Absolutely none! I only wish you could stay on in this country. I thought—but I was told you put a notice in the *Clarion* this afternoon, withdrawin' from the sheriff' race. So, what do you say, McCloud? You want that six thousand dollars?"

Steve, from where he stood, could not see Fount Ritchie; but he could see Joe McCloud. And beyond McCloud, in the ranch yard, he could see Stacey at Mark Brandon's stirrup, looking up at him and faintly smiling. McCloud seemed to be watching the pair, and finally he sighed.

"I've got to think about Stacey. Yes, Ritchie, I'll take the six thousand and clear out."

Steve knew he ought not to blame Joe McCloud. He simply couldn't help from feeling the way he did. He had tried to help McCloud. He had sweated and fought; he had killed a man and he had got his arm broken—all of it for nothing.

He was stretched out on the bed, staring up at the fly-specked ceiling, when McCloud came back inside.

"Ritchie made me a proposition—"

"I heard it," Steve said. "He didn't run you out of the country; he bought you out. All right. Like you said, I might be a damned hothead, and not good enough for your daughter. But no pair of crooks, like Ritchie and Mark Brandon, will ever run me out, or buy me out either!"

Steve heard a quick step. He got off the bed and saw Stacey beside her father, her lips white, her eyes blazing.

"At least dad doesn't go sneaking around making deals, the way you tried to do with Fount Ritchie!" she cried. "I heard you! And I don't believe Mark Brandon is a crook!"

"No?" said Steve. "Well, take a look at those reward posters on the dresser, there. Take a good look. As for Ritchie, I wouldn't make a deal with the tricky sidewinder for a million dollars! I was only trying to get him to talk. They gun-whipped Felipe, and now they've bought yo' dad off. They'll be after me next, but I'm just a slow-witted damn' fool that doesn't know anything but fight! Well, that's what I'm going to do, startin' right now!"

HE REACHED for his gun that swung from the gunbelt looped over a bed post. He shoved the gun under his waistband and went striding past McCloud and the girl, and on out the door.

"Steve!" Stacey's voice came sharply after him. "Steve where are you going?"

"To Grass Valley. To the depot," he answered roughly. He kept going. . . .

He was halfway to town when he met the station agent. The little man still had on his green eyeshade. He stopped his buckboard team, reached up and handed Steve a fold of yellow paper, and said breathlessly, "It came this morning—seems important."

Steve scanned the message, then shoved it in his pocket. "It is important! Now tell me—you meet Ritchie and Brandon on your way out here?"

The little man shook his head. "They headed this way about noon. Brandon's had men watching me, that's why I couldn't get away sooner. I lied to Brandon about the telegram—told him it hadn't come. But somehow he learned you had wired the sheriff at Dodge City. Boyd, he'll kill me if he finds out!"

"I think," Steve said grimly, "his killing days are about over. Mister, I'm in yo' debt!"

He reined his horse around and kicked in the spurs. If Ritchie and Brandon hadn't gone back to town, they ought to be at the Running R. And that was Steve's destination now.

Blue darkness had settled over the land by the time he reached the C in a Box, yet no light showed in the ranch house windows. The place seemed deserted. Steve wondered about that, but he didn't stop.

He counted over the men he could expect to meet. Manders and Boots, perhaps others, and also Ritchie and Brandon. He supposed that more cautious man—the type of Joe McCloud wanted for a son-in-law—would be riding in the opposite direction, back toward town for help. But this was a personal matter. This was a piece of business Steve had to settle in his own way.

He kept using the spurs. The throbbing agony of his splinted arm served only to whet his senses to a razor-edged keenness.

He was off his horse and following a narrow *sendero* through tangled brush, with the ranch buildings perhaps fifty yards ahead, when a tense voice sent a tingling through him like the shock of electricity.

*"Who are you? Stop right there!"*

"Stacey!" he exclaimed softly.

She came stumbling from the brush. Relief

made her voice throb. "Steve! It's you, Steve!"

His hand clamped her arm. The moon was up now, and by the pale light that filtered through the mesquite tops he saw tears in her eyes.

"What is it, Stacey? Why are you here?"

"It's dad! After you left, he got me to look through those posters for him. He won't admit that he needs glasses. But when I found the one of Mark Brandon—Brant Markham—after what you said—"

"Then old Joe decided they *were* a pair of crooks." Steve suddenly was smiling. "He got his dander up and came here to tell Ritchie what he could do with his six thousand dollars! That it, Stacey?"

"He came to arrest them, Steve! He still holds a special Ranger's commission. He—you ought to have heard him swearing, Steve! He said he'd been a fool, that he'd treated you like a mangy dog, and that Ritchie had made a fool out of him, on top of it. I couldn't stop him from coming here. Steve, they'll kill him!"

"Not if I can help it," Steve said. "He got me fired from the Rangers, but maybe I deserved it. He wants me to stay away from you, and maybe he's right there, too. But he was my Ranger captain, Stacey."

"Steve!" She was having a hard time keeping stride with him. "Steve, you'd help a man who got you fired? You'd be big enough to help him, when—"

"Do you think I'd let a bunch of cheap crooks gang up on your father? A man who used to be my friend?"

"He's still your friend, Steve. He always was. He did his best to keep them from firing you! He told the adjutant general that you were acting under his orders and with his consent. The adjutant general wouldn't swallow it. Oh, Steve—"

They were in sight of the ranch house, and there Steve stopped. A queer warmth flowed through him. It made his face change. It colored his voice.

"Why didn't Joe tell me this?"

"Because he's proud—like you are, Steve. You were so quick to believe he'd got you fired—"

"I was a fool, Stacey—maybe I've been a fool about a lot of things. Stacey—"

She was close to him, looking up at him. She said: "Do I have to tell you? Don't you know how I feel, Steve? It hurt when you were so cold and angry with dad. But nothing could ever change me—not really, Steve."

"I've been a fool," he muttered again.

HER lips were waiting, and he had never kissed her. He wanted to kiss her now, more than he had ever wanted anything. But he said, almost harshly, "I've got to go, Stacey." And he went forward swiftly, not looking back.

Yellow lamplight poured from the windows of the ranch house. The front door stood part way open, and Steve went directly to it, and there stopped. He could hear the voice of Joe McCloud, low-toned and scornful, graveled with wrath.

"So you thought you could buy me off? Why, you two-bit imitations of badmen, I cut my eye-teeth on *peloncias* like you! You're under arrest—the lot of you. I'm takin' you to town."

"Where's your warrant?" demanded the voice of Fount Ritchie.

"A Ranger don't need a warrant, Ritchie. Not in a case like this. That's another thing you didn't know—that I hold a special Ranger's commission. I'm arrestin' Brandon—Brant Markham—for murder. And I'm takin' in the rest of you as accomplices. I expect a lot of charges will turn up. Like the burnin' of my barn, and the kidnappin' of Felipe. Turn around, gentlemen, and hug the wall. Manders—you two-faced skunk—take this saddle rope I brought, cut it in pieces and tie their hands. Jump, damn you!"

"You old fool!" the voice of Mark Brandon snarled. "I told you that reward dodger is out of date. I was cleared on that murder charge ten years ago!"

"Turn around and hug the wall," Joe McCloud snapped.

Steve was standing in the doorway now. He could see the four sullen, defiant men—Ritchie and Brandon, Boots and Manders—facing Joe McCloud. He could see the fierce, contemptuous look on McCloud's seamy face as he held his gun on the four men. Something like pride rose up in Steve Boyd then, and through his mind flashed vivid scenes from the past, when he had stood shoulder to shoulder with Ranger Captain McCloud, facing death more times than one.

Steve had his gun out and ready. His eyes held their stare on the men who faced Joe McCloud, and he stepped through the doorway, saying quietly, "You're covered from two sides. I wouldn't make any move."

At that moment, as if Steve's entrance were his cue, Lafe Swanson came through the back doorway. Ritchie and his men had been waiting for some kind of break, and this was it. Ritchie shouted, "Fight for it!" And then Steve's Colt filled the room with gun-thunder.

The gun in the hand of Lafe Swanson blasted almost in the same instant, and the slug drove splinters from the door facing beside Steve. Then Swanson was falling, with a small hole in the serge cloth of his vest, just under his deputy's badge, to mark the spot where Steve's lead had struck him.

Manders, who was nearest to Swanson, hit for the back door, while Ritchie tried for the door beside Steve. Neither man reached his destination. Old Joe McCloud cut Manders' legs from under him with a single snapped shot. Steve pivoted, as Ritchie charged toward him, and brought the long barrel of his six-shooter sharply down on top of Ritchie's head. The momentum of Ritchie's heavy body kept him plunging forward, but he hit the pine boards of the porch and tried to plow through them with his face.

Meanwhile, the man called Boots had dived through a window, taking the sash with him; while Mark Brandon had stopped and come up with the gun Swanson had dropped.

"Drop it!" Boyd warned sharply. Then his gun roared once more, and afterward the room was still.

Outside, there was a clatter of hoofs, a shot, a triumphant yell. Stacey was running through the doorway. But Steve and Joe McCloud paid no attention to these things. They were staring at each other. They stared for a considerable time, and then Steve grinned good-humoredly.

"Cautious McCloud," he murmured. "That's you! The man that wants a milksop son-in-law. The man that came here to brace these bully boys, all by his lonesome. Why, damn you, Cap, if you ever say caution to me again, I'll ram the word right down yo' throat!"

"W-e-l-l," Cap McCloud hedged, "I never said a man should be cautious all the time. I only meant some of the time—when—h'mm—it's convenient. Say, Steve, I ain't told anybody, but my eyes is not so good. You reckon for certain it's Mark Brandon on that reward dodger?"

"I don't need any dodger," Steve said. He shoved his gun back under his waistband, reached in his pocket and brought out the telegram the station agent had given him. "Listen to this."

He read aloud: "'Brant Markham still wanted here for killing J. S. Duncan. Duncan's son offers thousand dollars for Markham and same amount for his partner, Ross Tanner, implicated in the killing. . . .'"

"What you think of that, Cap?" Steve demanded. "There's a description of the pair, too—descriptions that fit Brandon and Ritchie to a T. Furthermore, Cap, did you get that "same amount" business? This son of J. S. Duncan is offerin' a thousand bucks for each of these fine birds. That ought to be enough to save the ranch for you."

"I couldn't take it," McCloud declared. "When a bank or a county puts up a reward, it's different. But for some kid, for the murderers of his daddy—no, I'd rather lose the ranch. I guess I will lose—" He broke off, staring at a strange procession coming through the doorway.

The little station agent was in the lead, green eyeshade still in place. Behind him came Señor Montevedeo, the horse buyer, and behind him came 'Leon and Felipe—three Felipes, if Steve could believe his eyes. He blinked them and took another look.

"My bruzzers," Felipe explained, grinning. "My tween bruzzers. They bo'st these *caballos* for you while a cat is wink hees eye!"

"Felipe!" Stacey cried. "Do you think—there's thirty lead left, and so little time!"

"We bo'st them *caballos,*" Felipe bragged, "while a dead ship is wag hees tail. Jus' like I bo'st that Boots when he ron for the brush!"

"I brought them on here," the little station agent said proudly. "I figured there'd be trouble, and—"

But Steve was no longer listening. Steve was reaching for Stacey with his one good arm, and he promised himself that he would never let her go. It was in his mind that perhaps he would serve a couple terms as county sheriff. That would tide him over the drought, give him some money to stock his ranch. And he could build a better house—but he wouldn't wait for that!

THE END

# GRAND BUFFALO HUNT

AS LATE as 1871, the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad carried advertisements in London concerning a "Grand Buffalo Hunt" to be held "on the prairies of Nebraska and Colorado, U.S.A." British sportsmen were invited to participate in this unusual event and were promised the chance not only to shoot buffalo, but also to bag such game as elk, antelope, red deer, wild turkey and prairie chicken. Seven weeks time was required for the excursion.

For the round trip (Liverpool to New York via steamer, thence by express train to the Middle West) with guide service, horses, meals and everything furnished "with exception of wines, liquors, cigars, guns, rifles and ammunition," the British Nimrod was asked the sum of ninety guineas (about $450). Ladies were free to join the party, but due to the extra trouble involved in handling members of the weaker sex in this "wild land," the fare for women was one hundred guineas.

—Nell Murbarger.

# Boots and Saddles for

"Burn an answer back," Penland ordered the Kid.

**Even with Boothill's murderous salute thundering in their ears, those hounded, bloodstained riders of the night spewed forth their no-surrender answer to the badge-toting sixgun saint from hell, and rode out to prove that good badmen fear neither man, devil, nor the lonely, wilderness death that could be their only reward!**

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Blood Baptism of Buddy Longworth

"WOMEN," MacKinlon said wryly, "can sure raise hell!" Penland swung his head at the sound of the words. The statement was philosophical, maybe, but MacKinlon was no philosopher. At least, he didn't look like one. He looked like the four other men crouched down in the rock pocket with Penland and himself—hungry, short of sleep, overheated and pressured with the uneasiness which comes to any rider of back trails when the law is within shooting distance. But MacKinlon, the leader, was the

# the Boothill Buccaneers

**A Tensely Gripping Owlhoot Novel**

## By Tom W. Blackburn

most ragged of the lot; he looked like a man who is completely bushed.

A rock splinter stung up by a bullet had sliced across his cheek just before sunset yesterday, and without water to wash the scratch out, inflamation was already discoloring the flesh about it. And MacKinlon had lost his hat in the wild scramble into the rocks. Without the shelter of the hat, MacKinlon had been worked over by the sun—hard.

It was strange that a man could be cured in wind and weather until his skin was leathery, and still burn like a pilgrim without the scant protection to which he was accustomed. Yet Paul Penland had seen this happen enough to recognize the real anguish Mac MacKinlon would shortly undergo. Soon the irritation of the infection and the sun would roughen the evenness of his steady temper.

When that happened, this man whose loyalty to his saddle-mates was legend along the outlaw trails, would become more dangerous to his companions then even Marshal Bob St. John's posse, pinning them down here.

Penland was thinking of this when he answered MacKinlon. "You think one of those sharpshooters in the brush is wearing skirts, Mac?" he asked.

MacKinlon shot him a hard look. "You know what I mean!" he snapped.

Mac was right. Penland did know—had known at first—what Mac meant. Mac had said "women," but he was thinking of one woman. He was thinking of one woman and her brother and Paul Penland, and how the three had made it possible for Bob St. John to come up on the shrewdest gun-wolf ever to hit the owlhoot trail.

There was no movement in the brush where Bob St. John's men crouched. St. John was among the best in his business. He knew that men caught in open rocks in the sun, without water and food, could not stay there long. He knew, at a time like this, that patience was a better weapon than the best rifle.

Penland turned a little and glanced at Buddy Longworth, hunched down beside him.

THE kid was scared—scared bloodless. Maybe he'd never been in a tight spot where enemies were ringed around, silent because there was no need for sound. Or maybe he was yellow.

Penland would have bet on this, but a strange quirk in his loyalty to Shirley Longworth made him avoid this conclusion. The kid was Shirley's brother and Shirley had more sand than any girl he had ever known.

Buddy became aware of Penland's stare. "My God, Paul, we got to die like rats?" he asked thinly.

Dee Pelieu stirred. "Sing loud, Bud," he growled bitterly. "I want to hear plenty howling from you before St. John closes in on us!"

"Damn the howling!" Al Farrady grunted. "Turns my stomach. Suppose you slide up here and work a rifle for a spell. And mind, hold your sights low. A gut-shot posseman is better'n one killed outright. Somebody has got to take care of him."

Farrady backed from the rock. He backed carefully, keeping below the line of fire from the brush. Like Bob St. John, Farrady was a veteran. He was a part of the tight, smooth little band MacKinlon had built up. The kind of a man that Dee Pelieu and Harvey Cope and Mac, himself, were. The kind that Mac had planned to make Buddy Longworth into eventually. The kind that Paul Penland had been before he'd spilled from his saddle one night on a getaway with a belly wound—before Shirley Longworth had found him and hid him and nursed him back to health.

When Farrady was back from the rock, Buddy started forward. But he was spooked. He could see what Penland could see in the eyes of their companions, but he didn't know how to hold the knowledge down, and it made him jumpy. He got his head too high. Penland lashed out with a boot heel, nailing Buddy's shin. The boy yelped and spilled. A heavy rifle boomed in the brush across the wash and Buddy's hat kited from his head.

The kid sprawled on the sandy floor of the pocket. Watching him, Penland thought the kid was going to be sick, but the green look passed after a moment and he started for Farrady's rock again, crawling low and flat.

"Thanks, Paul," he murmured.

MacKinlon swung reddened eyes on him. "For what?" he gibed harshly. "You get it, sooner or later. Why not now?"

Buddy made no answer.

Harv Cope rolled onto his back to ease strained muscles and slid his hat down over his face. "When the last hand comes, Mac," he said from under the hat, "we'll want to draw straws to see who makes our pay-off. I've got a hankering for the chore."

"Payoff?" Mac repeated. "To Paul?"

"And the kid—" Harv agreed. "A pair of belly shots. And long enough before St. John rushes us for the rest of us to watch their thrashing, by hell!"

Penland looked at Cope's hat. "You don't have to wait, Harv," he said quietly.

Cope sat up, shoving his hat onto the top of his head.

"Don't rush it, Paul," he said. "You and the kid are a couple of extra rifles, so long as we can still hold St. John off. And there's no question about your using them. St. John wouldn't listen to any yarn about you coming back to us only to get the kid, and that the two of you were aiming to branch off onto the straight road. St. John ain't a fool."

"Damned right, he ain't!" Pelieu grunted. "But there's something. Paul comes in to the old hangout to get the kid—*he* says. As though the kid was still tied to his sister's apron. As though Paul Penland gave a damn what happened to anybody but himself. The whole thing don't set right. And sure as hell, St. John followed you, or he'd have never got a line on us. That you and St. John had got together before you ever started in for us ain't sure. But it's a fair bet, worth my money!"

Penland eyed the little outlaw. Pelieu was the kind of man who walked always in the shadow of bigger men. As a consequence, when he could crowd another man and get away with it, he didn't know where to stop. And he was therefore dangerous if he was not checked. This was not a good line of thinking for him to follow.

"You could have jumped me when I came into the camp, Dee," Penland said steadily. "You could jump me now."

Pelieu swung his eyes away. "I'll take my

chances with St. John, but not with you, Paul. I know what chance I'd have, fronting your gun face-to-face! We're all done. You can't get us out of this. Mac can't either. I'll wait it out—"

MacKinlon turned and raised on one elbow, neither impatient nor angry. The man's strength lay in his refusal to be stampeded, even by his own emotions.

"Shut up!" he told Pelieu bluntly. "Paul's here. St. John followed him. But we're boxed, now. That's what counts. If there's got to be talk, make it about how we'll slide out of this—all of us together, or just some of us—"

MacKinlon looked at Paul, Mac's thought as clear to Penland as if he had spoken. MacKinlon was thinking that Paul Penland had been from the beginning an odd duece in the gang. A man with a hard string of luck who had turned bitter enough finally to turn to the back trails.

Penland had been the coolest of them all, always saving himself—that he could move like a shadow and strike like a diamond-back. He was thinking that if his own skills and his own ability failed him, Penland might still hit a way to get them out from under Bob St. John's guns.

"We're not whipped down yet, eh, Paul?" he said.

"I wouldn't know about you, Mac," Penland said quietly. "But the kid and I are not through riding yet. I made a promise to Bud's sister. I aim to keep it."

MacKinlon nodded and eased back down in the sand. Buddy Longworth twisted around in his place at the breastworks of rock. He stared protestingly at Penland. "My God, Paul!" he blurted. "We can't take them with us. That'd kill our chances complete!"

"Keep your head down, you little fool!" Penland snapped. "Who said we were taking anybody?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Five Men—Three Horses!

AT THREE in the afternoon the sun was at blazing heat. Sweat poured into Penland's eyes. Farrady and Pelieu were watching him, as was Harv Cope, from under the brim of the Stetson.

The kid was still on the breastworks. That was a gesture. There wasn't anything at which to shoot. St. John wouldn't risk men. His boys would be under cover, watching closely. That's all. Waiting. A bullet brand of poker, with a checked bet.

There were Farrady and Pelieu and Cope, then. And there was MacKinlon. And because he was MacKinlon, a man who did not hurry, there was no need to consider him now. Only the other three. The immediate danger was in them and in Bob St. John. MacKinlon later, maybe—MacKinlon and St. John, then. But now Farrady and Pelieu and Cope.

Three men of a strange trade, their thinking channelled by a strange code. And what they could not understand, what they could not forgive, was that Penland, who had once been one of them, had rejoined them only to get Buddy Longworth—that he had returned to take a recruit away from them—that he was done with riding the high trails.

This was cause for suspicion, distrust. This was fertile ground for bitterness. And they were bitter. Each of them, in his own way, was holding Paul Penland fully to account for St. John's trap—and they would expect payment in a coin they could spend, even here. A bullet in the belly.

Penland's and the kid's death would not come too swiftly. And sooner or later, one of the three would grow bold enough to make the try. This was a case where waiting was not wise.

It took a deal of watching and thinking. In the end, Penland thought Harvey Cope, under the cover of the Stetson over his face, would be the first to try. When he was sure of this, he shifted his own position until he was sprawled at exactly the right angle. Only then did he brush the man's hat away.

Cope glared at him venomously, but made no attempt to retrieve the hat.

"Trying to make it scary, Paul?" he asked softly.

Penland shook his head. "No. When a man is thinking of me, I want to see his face."

Cope smiled. Penland knew that the man's left belt gun was in his hand, lying along his thigh on the far side where Paul could not see it, the hammer back to full cock. Harv was ready.

To his own right, Penland was aware of MacKinlon, wise enough to know what was coming; too wise to interfere. He was also aware of the Longworth kid, trying to understand the stony expression in Cope's eyes—in Farrady's eyes—in Pelieu's eyes. Trying to understand but too young and too green and too watery in the belly.

It was funny that a girl like Shirley Longworth would have such a brother. He had none of her looks, her wisdom, her guts. He was worthless, yet he was her brother. Very funny. Or maybe not. Maybe no funnier than the fact that when it came time for a man to fall in love with her, it had to be Paul Penland. The Paul Penland whose face decorated the boards in every law office in the southwest; the Penland whose operations with the MacKinlon gang had doubled MacKinlon's daring and slippery evasions. Maybe it was no fun-

nier to have a water-belly kid for a brother than a nerveless cougar for a lover.

Penland wondered if Shirley Longworth knew this. He knew Cope, Pelieu and Al Farrady thought he had deliberately brought St. John behind him when he climbed to their hide-out in the ridges. He supposed MacKinlon thought the same thing. But he had not studied it beyond this point. He did so, now.

He recalled sitting in Shirley Longworth's parlor when his wound had knitted, listening to her worry aloud about the kid brother who had run off. He recalled that she seemed certain the kid had headed for the MacKinlon bunch. And she had been bitter that men like MacKinlon—men like himself—still roamed the hills.

He remembered the painful transition through which he had passed, a transition in which he forced down his bitterness, in which he sacrificed the wild freedom he had found in the hills. He remembered the night he had told Shirley Longworth that he owed her something and that in payment, he would bring her brother back.

He could see Shirley Longworth's eyes again. He could smell again her fragrance, close to him in the lamplight. He had stood there, making this fool's promise instead of forgetting the kid—instead of reaching out his arms and taking the girl as a man should take a woman. And he supposed that because he had not reached out his arms, Shirley Longworth did not know Paul Penland wanted her as he had never wanted anything.

He supposed that he might have seemed a man whose way of life admitted no ties to a woman, but who wanted to repay a debt. Certainly she had believed he could keep his promise. Her eagerness told him that. But she might have thought of Robert St. John and his long hunt for MacKinlon. She might have made a deal with the marshal. A deal in which she would provide him an unknowing guide to MacKinlon's hiding place if the marshal would give that guide and her own brother a chance to get away from MacKinlon before he closed in.

It would not have been a smart deal. Bob St. John hunted men as other men hunted game. His was a profession, bound by professional rules. He would take a man fair. He would not hunt for bounty. But a deal made with an outsider would not stand between him and his quarry. To St. John's mind, Paul Penland had changed nothing in quitting the gang. Penland had been at Fargo. He had been at Trestle Three on the Kansas Pacific. He had been a part of the shoot-out at Farris Crossing. He had paid no legal penalty and he was still fair game.

To St. John, Buddy Longworth was fair game, also. He had joined MacKinlon of his own will. That he had not yet participated in one of MacKinlon's strikes was only an accident. He was a yearling, to be scotched with the others before there was poison in his fangs.

These were disturbing thoughts in the sun. They troubled Penland. If they touched the truth, then it was not Shirley Longworth who had been the fool, but himself.

PENLAND'S preoccupation gave Harvey Cope the opportunity he had been waiting for. Harvey rolled, jerking his gun over his body, swinging it into line. Penland did not see the move begin. It was already half born before he was aware of it. It was fortunate that he had wormed to the position he wanted beforehand.

His plan had been to crowd Cope. Now that this was not necessary, he had no time to reach for his own gun. He had meant to use his foot to prod Cope. Now he kicked with savage force, driving the point of his boot into Cope's face. At the same instant, Cope fired. The bullet hit the sand an inch from Penland's temple.

But the ruse of the kick in the face worked neatly. Hurt, startled, Cope instinctively tried to better his position, reflexes automatically forcing him upright, rebelling against the helplessness of a prone position. Farrady and Pelieu yelped warning at him. But Cope knew he had begun something with Penland which must be finished. Cope bounded to his feet.

As his head and shoulders came up above the level of the stone breastworks around the little pocket in the rocks, a heavy Winchester boomed in the brush across the draw. Bob St. John knew how to wait. He would not let his men be careless. The rifle slug struck Cope in the neck. He staggered across the pocket and spilled down across the rocks on the side toward the ridge. Lying there at a slant, with the sandstone staining darkly with his blood, he died.

MacKinlon spoke after a long moment with a callous tilt of his head at the dead man. "He'll begin to smell by late tomorrow."

No one answered him. He swung his head toward Penland. Paul saw that the inflammation about the scratch on his cheek was widening. He thought MacKinlon was already in fever. And fever could shake even a stone man.

"I said he'll begin to smell!" Mac repeated sharply.

Penland nodded. "He won't be alone," he said. "But I don't aim to be here tomorrow."

MacKinlon frowned. He looked a long time at Penland, then crawled across the pocket. He remained there long moments, peering out. Finally he crawled back.

"The horses past that sumac clump, eh?" he said. "Looks like some remounts brought along in case they're needed. Separate from the main remuda, and with just one man watching them. Scant cover between us and them, but it might do after dark, if a man was quick and quiet. You aim to try for them?"

"After dark," Penland agreed.

Dee Pelieu crawled over to where MacKinlon had been and looked out. He turned after a moment, his face pale and his eyes protesting.

"But there's only three horses by the sumac!" he said.

"And five of us," Penland agreed. "The kid and me are going. And maybe one other. It's up to you boys who the other is—make your own pick."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Titan of the Trails

BY THE time the shadows started marching down from the ridge, MacKinlon's face had taken on a darker color. A blistering burn, with the swelling irritation of the infection rooted in his cheek making a puffy mask of his features. He kept staring at Dee Pelieu and Al Farrady. Sometimes he smiled. He didn't look at Penland. He didn't look at Buddy Longworth. But the other two did. And for good reason.

Under cover of Harvey Cope's attack and sudden death, Penland had slid his gun from leather. It lay on his lap, almost in his hand, ready. And the kid, somehow understanding a little of what faced him, now, had given over worrying about Bob St. John's posse. He seemed to have come to the realization that the danger there was not immediate. He seemed to know, now, what the others had known from the beginning—that St. John was a waiting man, that he was not a fool, that he would not charge a MacKinlon bunch until thirst and the sun and hunger had whipped them first.

So the kid had turned away from the natural breastworks and sprawled with his back against the rock, his carbine at full cock across his chest and thigh and the muzzle of its short barrel almost always in line with either Pelieu or Farrady. Penland thought the kid worthless, and maybe he was, practically speaking—but in this one thing he'd had judgment. He hadn't turned the carbine toward MacKinlon. That would have been foolish. MacKinlon was no threat—not yet—and the kid had known it.

The shadows came on slowly. Temperature in the pocket dropped steadily. After the heat, the scant coolness of approaching evening was relief, desperately needed. Penland chewed his own thickened tongue and he wondered how much punishment the others had taken. The kid had writhed under his. But the kid was scared—wide-eyed scared—and maybe the writhing was part of that. But Pelieu and Farrady were veterans. They'd taken a couple of days cooking in the sun without water before. And they had pride, after a fashion, an adherence to the strange code which made an open evidence of discomfort a tag of weakness.

Even in desperation, men clung close to the code by which they were accustomed to living. A man might not have a soul. Penland didn't know. But he had a pattern, all right. MacKinlon had one, and Pelieu and Farrady—and himself. Even the kid, maybe. And so he waited.

It was Farrady who got his sand up first. He twisted toward MacKinlon, carefully, so his movement would not be misunderstood.

"Paul quit us, Mac," he said raggedly. "To hell with him! There's three horses. They belong to Dee and you and me. The devil with Paul; the devil with the kid. This is no good. The three of us belong together, Mac. It's always been that way. It shouldn't change, now!"

MacKinlon's smile was without humor. "It's each one of us, now, Al," he said quietly.

"But we're in it together—the three of us!" Farrady protested.

"Then you think you can beat Paul's hand? You think you can beat the kid's carbine? You try it, Al. We'll see."

Farrady's face was without color, now that the heat was gone. He looked at MacKinlon. Penland saw he was taking MacKinlon's fever into consideration. Penland saw Farrady was also thinking that MacKinlon had faced many guns, but that he had never faced Paul Penland. MacKinlon had been boss of the gang. But he had never prodded Penland too far. Maybe because Penland had always taken his lead. Or maybe because MacKinlon had known from the day Penland had joined them that here was a man he could not beat.

"We've stuck by you, Mac," Pelieu said. "You got to stick by us, now."

"There was profit in sticking by me," MacKinlon murmured. "I owe you nothing, or Al. Just myself. It's my skin, now. Paul and the kid for theirs and you for yours and me for mine. Don't sing it sad, now, Dee. I never heard you sing before."

MACKINLON stopped. Penland felt his own muscles tighten. Mac was telling the others this was their chance. A man could know a lot of things about saddle-mates, but not what they would do when the play fined down like this. Tense, holding himself to unhurriedness, Penland waited. The kid was

sweating. He shot a look at Penland. A plea for encouragement. Penland met the look blankly, giving nothing. The kid ran a dry tongue over his cracked lips.

Pelieu and Al Farrady hunched closer to the bottom of the pocket, the sun kept slanting down until it was gone and the shadows were down on the pocket and night was sliding out of the ridges. The breathing of the five of them made a little sound and there was the distant talk of birds in the brush, and once shadows played tricks with Harvey Cope's body so that a rifleman across the wash thought he had seen movement and flung a .45-90 slug into the already lifeless form. But there was nothing beyond this. And finally the kid broke. Not much. Just a little.

"Time, Paul?" he asked.

"In half an hour," Penland answered.

MacKinlon wiped a hand across his swollen face. "There's still five of us, Penland," he said. "You'd start while there's still five, anyway?"

Penland looked directly at him and nodded. "We're going in half an hour, the kid and me."

MacKinlon wiped at his face again. He spoke once more, and his voice was almost gentle, almost regretful. "I wish it could be another way, Al," he said. "We've ridden a lot of trails together—Dee and you and me—"

Farrady's jaw sagged. "You're not leaving it to Paul?" he croaked.

MacKinlon shook his head, very obviously fighting a little to cling to the steadiness which had made him the titan of the back-trails.

"I said it was each of us. Paul says we start in half an hour. And two can't go. Not five on three horses. I can't leave that to Paul. Could I be sure I wouldn't draw his first slug?"

Fever hadn't slowed MacKinlon. Not yet. Since he had decided on the horses, Penland had known that if the break was forced to him, he would have to handle Mac first. Mac was fast with a gun. Faster than Dee or Farrady. So he would have to be handled first. And now here was MacKinlon clearly seeing this and putting the pressure against the other two so that Penland would not be forced to make the break.

Penland was not entirely sure where MacKinlon's gun lay. He was certain only that he was in such a position that MacKinlon could not reach him without a twisting turn which would slow him—enough, Penland thought. So he was not too concerned and he continued to wait.

Pelieu and Al Farrady waited, also. But this had been a hard day and there had been a night before the day and a day before the night—all of them hard—and a man wore thin in spite of himself. So finally, when MacKinlon's purpose had percolated fully into them, Dee and Farrady moved. It was not clumsy. It was closely cooperative, in spite of the fact neither had spoken to the other. A simultaneous reach by two men for their respective weapons, their eyes on a third.

MacKinlon must have had his gun nearly ready, for he fired twice before either of the other two had their pieces clear, and in these close quarters, he shot accurately. A bullet kills a man by shock or rupturing a vital organ or by shattering the brain. But when death has sat in a man's lap for two days and a night, he does not die so easily. MacKinlon's bullet took away half of Farrady's face, blinding the man, but Farrady loosed one shot. It passed wide of MacKinlon, struck the granite lining the pocket, and sang angrily aside to smash Penland a hard blow in the upper thigh. A queer hurt, with terrific impact but little penetration.

MacKinlon's second bullet struck Pelieu in the throat. Wiry as a cat and as stubborn about death, Dee came partially onto his knees with life running swiftly from him. With his hands both gripped hard about his weapon, he fired the piece almost in MacKinlon's face. Penland saw Mac's sprawled body flinch and the almost immediate stain which appeared on his shirt on one side, just above where it hunched in under his belt. Penland swung his own gun toward Dee, thinking the man had to be knocked down, but Buddy Longworth's carbine jolted heavily, making a startling flash with its muzzle flame at these close quarters, and Pelieu was flung back and down across Harvey Cope's stiffened body.

There was startled whisperings of sound from the brush across the wash—a harsh, quick, whispered question, and a sudden sweep of rifle fire. Penland nodded at the kid.

"Burn an answer back," he said. "But keep your damned head down!"

The kid crawled to the edge of the rocks, cautiously slid his rifle out, and pumped three shots from its magazine. Penland looked across at MacKinlon. The man was on his back, quietly ramming a folded bandanna inside of his shirt and re-cinching his belt to hold it in place.

"We're starting, Mac," he said. "You coming?"

"If I don't go, one of you won't either, Paul," he grunted.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A Fighting Gent Goes Out to Die

MACKINLON rolled over and drew his knees under him. Slowly, very carefully, he came partially upright, his head below the

level of surrounding rocks. The man was iron. Penland thought he had been savagely wounded by Pelieu's bullet and the sun and the infection in his swollen face had sapped him heavily, but he was reasonably steady. Penland, himself, worked his feet under him. The place in his thigh where Al Farrady's glancing shot had landed hurt. The hurt of a hard hammer blow, more than of a bullet tear. Stooped as he was below the shelter of the rocks, Penland's hand was near the wound and he explored it with his fingers.

The flattened bullet was barely under the skin. He could feel its expanded bulk there, rolling along atop muscle fibre as his fingers nudged it. He had not lost blood to speak of, but the leg was not reliable and increasing circulation, now that he had weight on it, set a steady, compressing agony to beating through it. A fluke, this wound. Something out of nobody's book. The hurt, he thought, came from the impact, from the hard jolt of the flattened lead—a bruise likely to give trouble like a bruise.

The kid, pasty of face and wide-eyed, was doubled on his knees, still clutching the carbine across his chest, and with his mind come to a place where it would not work. Penland spoke to him.

"Mac first, then you. Keep that carbine off the rocks. Sound travels like hell in the brush at night. Tail Mac. And don't scare. I'll bust in the back of your head if you spook. This has got to be quiet!"

"We can't make it," the kid said thinly. "I'd rather wait for it, here!"

"Shirley wants you home," Penland said stonily. "Start moving!"

MacKinlon went over the lip of the rocks surrounding the pocket like a diamond-back over a greasewood deadfall. A faint rasping. A liquid worming movement. His voice came back, muffled almost to inaudibility.

"I'd like to see St. John's face when he gets tired of waiting."

Penland smiled thinly. This was the first full sign he had seen that MacKinlon's iron was buckling. This was the first outward evidence that he was wearing thin. St. John wouldn't get tired of waiting. St. John was as old a hand at his business as they were at theirs. The marshal would know what those shots in the pocket had meant—those shots from short-range belt guns which had not been directed across the wash at his own men. And St. John would know that even the MacKinlon crew would have limits of endurance. He would know that the break had to come tonight, probably even that it was under way, now.

"If we're jumped," he whispered to the kid as the kid slid over the rocks, "bust for those horses. When you get to them, stand your ground long enough to empty your gun, then hit leather and ride like hell for the top of the ridge. We'll meet there."

He followed the kid, then, a third silent shadow, working smoothly across the rocks.

A minute passed. Another. MacKinlon got to the shelter of the first scrub and rose to his feet in a crouch. With a quick glance behind him, he started forward, running raggedly but with incredible skill, putting his feet down firmly and silently despite his wound.

The kid bounced up, nearly fully erect, and started off. Penland came up. A rifle slammed from a patch of greasewood half a dozen yards to the left. MacKinlon pivoted completely, staggered, and ran on. Penland swung his gun up and fired at the image of muzzle-flame still impressed on his eyes. The brush parted and a posseman spilled out of it.

Some distance off, perhaps sixty yards, Bob St. John's voice roared: "There they go! Watch the horses!"

The night split open and an arc of gunfire, fanning from the brush far out toward the pocket of rocks they had just quitted, winked and hammered out crashing sound. Riccochets moaned angrily. The kid yelped, but his stride did not break and Penland thought he had only been stung with a chunk of flying debris.

It was a hard, bitter run. MacKinlon plowed through a last clump of brush and charged straight at the one man guarding the three horses. The psychology of an iron man. Wounded as he was, there was sand in MacKinlon's charge and although the guard was flat-footed, with a rifle in his hands, and MacKinlon was a sharp, clean target as he came toward him, the utter silent savagery of the charge shook the guard as it was supposed to and he missed his shot. He did not fire again. MacKinlon nailed him, leaped his prostrate body, and caught the bridle of the nearest of the nervous, dancing horses.

None of the three animals were saddled. MacKinlon knotted his hand into the animal's mane and hauled himself up. Teetering there, he cleaned out the chambers of his gun, flung the weapon down, and reined the horse in a rearing pivot.

Running like a scared rabbit, the kid reached one of the animals. Forgetting Penland's instructions or deliberately ignoring them, he dropped his rifle and clawed onto the back of the animal. Spooked by the gunfire and the shouting, the horse danced sidewise, nearly unseating the kid, then wheeled and loped stiffly after MacKinlon's mount, with the kid clinging precariously and reaching hard for one bridle rein, which had slipped from him.

ST. JOHN'S men had broken from the brush, their slow approach to the rock pocket now useless, and as men will in a hunt, they raced

down, ignoring danger and deaf to St. John's roaring. Some of them were close. Too close. Penland snagged up the carbine Buddy Longworth had dropped. He was not covering MacKinlon's get-away. He was not even covering the kid in this moment. This was down to fundamentals and it was himself who needed a respite to get mounted and gone—*muy pronto.*

The lever of the carbine worked rythmically. It was not difficult shooting. Perhaps to a man who did not understand the shadows night light put across a pair of sights the targets would have been impossible. Murky running shadows, shouting, leaping from one covert to the next, coming on in impossible numbers—half a dozen, a dozen, a score. With his torn and bullet-bruised leg paining sharply under him and his two companions already gone and the closest of the posse within scant yards of him, Penland fired carefully.

A man went down. Another veered off as though he had sighted a fresh quarry and ran blindly until he plowed full into a tree. A third stopped, doubled, and was sick on the grass. The echo of gunfire. And over it all, Bob St. John's roaring voice.

"They've busted loose! Back to your horses, you fools! Into leather—fast!"

There was suddenly no one close to Penland. He ducked around the remaining unsaddled horse and climbed astride the animal from the far side, where its body gave him protection. MacKinlon and the kid were gone. Out of sight and out of hearing. But there was only one route they could follow. Penland knew this. St. John would know it, also. So for a little while there would be no evasive skill, no shrewdness, no trickery. Just a hard, bitter ride, risked on the chance that their sudden break and the theft of the three carelessly guarded, unsaddled horses would delay the posse a little.

Ducking low over the back of his nervous animal, Penland gave the horse its head. Low timber branches scraped at him. Twice the horse stumbled heavily on bad footing, but in time it regained its stride. Running hard, the horse took a dim trail down across the wash three hundred yards above the bosque in which St. John had holed up his men to watch the rock pocket. The trail tipped up the far side, slanted carelessly up the slope of the steep ridge beyond, and broke out of brush and scrub timber to make a run across a bald area of burned grass.

When he came into this, Penland saw the kid and MacKinlon ahead of him. The kid was trailing MacKinlon. He had got up the dangling rein, but he was riding sloppily, still, too scared to settle down. MacKinlon was riding off-center on his mount, crouched forward over his wound to ease it. Occasionally he twisted a little to look back at the kid and possibly at Penland.

Penland didn't like those looks. He hammered more speed out of his horse, but he failed to close the gap between himself and the pair ahead. He realized he had drawn the poorest of the three horses. And before he was half across the bald spot, lead began to sing after him. St. John had been at least partially prepared for a break like this. He had gotten men up fast—too fast for a fugitive on a slow horse.

MacKinlon and then the kid hammered into heavy brush and scrub growth on the far side of the bald spot. Before Penland reached the fringe of this growth, half a dozen or more mounted possemen were into the open behind him, Bob St. John in the lead, and the lot of them coming fast and hard.

There were flashes of open in the brush beyond the bald spot. Twice Penland had a glimpse of his two companions. After this there followed a period of threading a maze of clumps and bosques in which he left the track to his mount, trusting the animal to follow those ahead. Then he piled into a tiny clearing to see a horse down in the grass, the limp figure of its rider spilled half a dozen yards away.

The kid. The kid was down. And MacKinlon, holding his mount barely in check with one hand, was leaning down, trying to line his gun on the kid's body. Penland tried a shot, missed, and drew MacKinlon's attention. The outlaw fired—probably at the horse, Penland thought, just as he had fired at the kid's horse and brought it down. The bullet struck Penland just above the top of one boot and tore the hell out of the calf of his leg.

This was MacKinlon's play. MacKinlon had stood with him against Al Farrady and Pelieu because MacKinlon had believed Penland could do a better job of breaking through St. John's cordon of possemen than either of the other two. But all three of them were clear, momentarily, now. And the need was something which would check the possemen briefly. Something which would increase the lead over pursuit. Finding part of their quarry spilled down in the grass would delay St. John and his men.

Penland came down from his mount and tried another shot at MacKinlon. He missed again. He tried to walk and the hurt in his torn leg flared up at him and knocked him down with the effect of a blow. Time was thin. So thin that MacKinlon, seeing him spill, misunderstood. Wheeling his horse, MacKinlon rode on hard into the brush again.

Penland drew a deep breath on the grass and forced himself stubbornly upright. There was the kid, still limp where he had fallen when his horse went down. And back in the

brush, St. John's boys were shouting excitedly, angrily—and coming on. One leg battered terribly at the thigh. The other torn at the calf. And only legs left to use. The kid's horse was dead and his own had spurted off after MacKinlon.

PENLAND staggered over to the kid. He was out. Maybe he was dead. Bending, Penland swung him up across his shoulder and started at a crazy, reeling half-run up the slope. Fifty yards, a hundred yards. Deep into thorny brush. Deep into shadows. Up onto the crown of the ridge. There the thin light of the scant moon silhouetted the tops of other ridges, with depressions between. Penland could not count them. But somewhere beyond—three miles, four miles, ten miles—was the Longworth place.

The Longworth place, lying in a little hollow. Shirley was there. By a lamp, likely. Maybe trying to read. Wondering if the tall, bitter man whom she had nursed and fed would keep his promise. Not wondering if he could keep it, but wondering if he would. Wondering if Paul Penland would bring her kid brother home. Not caring whether Paul Penland himself came back. Only her brother. That was a woman's way. Not figuring the kid's worth. Not wondering if she could keep him, once he was back. Not giving a damn about that. Only wanting him.

Three miles, ten miles—a thousand. What was the difference? A man could not go far with a double burden when his legs were shot out from under him. Not when Bob St. John was loose in the brush and he was afoot. Not at all.

Yet Penland hauled the kid in under a heavy bush and crouched there himself, folding the slack of his pants leg against the wound in his calf and wrapping his bandanna about it tightly. And the while he did this, he watched an open patch a quarter of a mile away down the slope.

MacKinlon appeared in it shortly, followed by Penland's own riderless horse. MacKinlon was riding very loosely, now. A dead man, trying to escape with his life. Penland swore softly at him. He had not thought MacKinlon would last so long. He had not thought MacKinlon would be able to ride, even so loosely. He had not thought MacKinlon would have the strength left, once they were clear, to turn on Buddy Longworth and himself. An error in judgment. And so MacKinlon had the chance, now, that the kid and himself should have had.

MacKinlon rode across the open, reeling in his saddle. And a little past the middle, he spilled from his saddle. He rolled a little distance and lay still. Penland, staring off down the slope, squinted, watching the dark blob of shadow against the grass. There was no more movement. MacKinlon's horse ran a rod farther, halted uncertainly, and finally stood head-down.

So this was it. Penland pulled his head down between his shoulders and brushed at a twig across his face. Both legs hurt him mercilessly in this cramped position. The kid, beside him, was breathing steadily, but he must have rapped his head in his spill, for he was still out and there was a trickle of blood coming out of the hair ahead of one ear. A fine red mark traced aimlessly down across a thin white face. A face with nothing good in it. Nothing bad, either. Just a face. Penland stared at it. Men got themselves shot to hell for peculiar reasons.

The open patch down the slope stayed empty for a little, except for MacKinlon's limp figure and his head-down horse. Then there was a shout, coming clearly up the slope, and the first tide of Bob St. John's posse burst from the brush onto the grass. More of them appeared. Sixteen-eighteen—an accurate count was impossible—and useless. Beyond a certain point the length of the odds stacked against a man made little difference. Penland could not tell whether MacKinlon stirred as the possemen rode up to him or not. Maybe St. John was still being cautious—and sure. A gun barked abruptly, twice. The muzzle flame stabbed downward from a saddle toward MacKinlon's body.

Penland looked away. MacKinlon had been a big man, in his way. A legend, almost a part of the country. A kind of man who would not return when the last of them were gone. And right or wrong, as the pattern of men's lives went, it wasn't good to see the end come like this—callous and unsporting, like to a treed cougar or a rabid stock dog.

Men's voices in argument came up the slope with St. John's bass rising above the others. The posse swung into a wide line, cut back on its own trail for a little, and then swung through the brush and up the slope, beating as it came. Penland pulled his head down further between his shoulders and swore at the hurt in his legs. After a little he swore at Buddy Longworth, lying heavily beside him. And then, because the posse had turned silent, he held to silence himself, waiting.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### "What Profit a Man . . ."

TOWARD dawn St. John had flung his men over every square rod of the ridge slope. Twice possemen had passed within a dozen feet of the low bosque in which Penland lay with Buddy Longworth's inert form beside him. A very competent search. They had dis-

covered the kid's horse, dead a quarter of a mile away. They had discovered Penland's horse, head-down in the brush. And some place on the way up the slope, they had discovered blood. A man had to be bleeding hard to leave blood in his track over that kind of going. But they had found it and Penland knew he had not done a good job of binding his torn calf.

He was grateful that the kid was still out. One man could lie soundless. With two there always had to be talk—a whisper, at least. And talk at the wrong moment . . . Penland shrugged. It was good the kid was still out.

Waiting was not so hard. Hurt and thirst and hunger drove a man for a while. After that, weariness set in. A deep weariness, grateful for silence and motionlessness. And with it, the hurt eased. A man found a new perspective. An impersonal way of looking at things.

In the beginning a man started out to do a chore—a fool's chore, for a fool's reason. He started out mechanically and cold and determined, knowing the odds and writing them off, not giving a damn. A woman had soft hands and a gentle way with her. She asked no questions and she was beautiful in the lamplight. A man didn't know the words to use with her. Maybe he wasn't even sure he wanted to use them. Maybe he half-way thought that women were good for some kinds of men, but that he was the wrong kind. But there was feeling in him he didn't fully understand and he wanted to do something. So he started out on an errand with the devil in the saddle beside him.

And when the going was the roughest, he didn't count what a fool he was being. He bulled on. And it wasn't until his pick was broken and his sleeve cards played out and his string unravelled, that he began to figure back on what he had tried to accomplish. But then he didn't much care about the right of it or the wrong or even whether he had been a fool or something else. He just wanted to stay where he was—like he was—and wait. . . .

THE kid's voice was harsh. "Snap out of it, damn you!"

Penland heard him as though from a distance and it was puzzling, because he knew the kid was still beside him and he had not heard the kid rouse. He stirred a little.

"They've missed us complete and pulled back down the slope to organize again. Probably heat some coffee while they're about it. We've got to get moving, now!"

Brisk, determined counsel. Puzzling, also. The kid was a whipped dog. Penland remembered his rabbity fear, the way he had hit horseback when they made their break, abandoning his carbine without firing a shot from it. And a whipped dog did not raise his hackles like this.

If St. John had pulled his men back down the slope, though, the kid was right. It was time to travel.

Penland turned his head. "Start moving," he said quietly. "Keep to the summits. Hold east. Three—four—five miles—"

"I know where I am," the kid answered crisply. "Get your feet under you!"

Penland shook his head. "I'll cover for you. My tracks stop here."

His voice sounded odd. Wheezy. The kid bent over him.

"Get up, damn you!"

The words were punctuated with the explosion of the kid's hand against Penland's cheek. One hand and one cheek, then the other hand and the other cheek. The sting of the blows rolled back the darkness. Blinking, Penland saw gray dawn was already making.

The kid got his hands under Penland's arms and Penland came up onto his feet, supported there on his dead legs. The ridge tilted crazily. The kid caught him and the ridge steadied.

"Come on!" the kid said.

The brush parted. Grass was underfoot. Penland could not feel it. He could feel nothing below his hips. There was the kid beside him, though, taking strides and steadying him and they were making progress, so he thought his own legs must be moving.

They went down the far side of the ridge into a little valley and a wash and started up the far side. The slanting grade was hard. Wind whistled in Penland's throat, sticking there with every breath, and the kid was alway beside him, sometimes snarling and swearing and sometimes silent, but always urging him on. The kid was breathing easily. He was steady on his feet. Behind them St. John was back at work again. The sound of his men calling to one another sounded occasionally in the quiet air, but the kid kept to heavy shelter and no guns reached after them.

Penland began to fall after a time, heavily and with increasing frequency. Staggering, clumsy falls, and he would know he was down only when he felt twigs and grass against his own face. His body was heavy, a dead weight to lift from the ground. He rolled over once and looked up at the dim figure of the kid above him.

"I've done my part," he protested. "Get out of here. Get going. If they come up on us and you're caught, I'll kill you after what we've been through to get you this far. Your sister—

The kid bent and hauled him to his feet again. "You think you're the only one that owes Shirley something?" he grunted. "I'm not going to let you cheat me out of repaying her any more than you'd let Bob St. John

cheat you out of your payment. If your feet won't work, then walk on your guts!"

There was another ridge, another valley. It wasn't so bad. Penland was not sure he was moving. He was beyond a point of caring. He knew only that his legs were wooden, that most of him was wooden. There was no control, no sensation, no hurt. There would even be comfort, deep and satisfying, if the kid would leave him alone. If the kid would just quit dragging him, prodding him. . . .

It was day. Full day. The sun was warm on Penland's jacket. He sweat. The moisture coursed down his face. It dripped under his clothing. But he was cold. A deep cold that crept slowly through him. But even it was welcome. This had to end sometime. . . .

* * *

It was hard to know when the walking stopped. There were so many confused impressions. Some certainly were hallucinations and a man could not be sure about the others. A small cabin beside a clearing. Smoke from the chimney. An open door. A girl with a white face and great, rounded eyes. A little cry and the girl running to him first before she ever turned her tear-streaked face toward the kid. The kid talking, quietly.

"He got me loose from the MacKinlon bunch and Bob St. John because you wanted it, Sis. I wasn't worth what he had to do, to either of you. But he got me loose. And when I saw the kind he was, I knew I'd have to get him back here to you. It was some kind of payment—to both of you. . . .

There was a bed in the cabin. Bottles, peroxide and liniment.

"He'll win out," the kid said. "He came this far. He can go farther. We've got to move on. St. John will track us here. There's the quarter-section on the Las Animas Uncle Fred said we could have. There's a cabin on it. We can get by. I'll get the wagon."

The wagon jolted. The kid drove it hard for the load aboard it—the whole contents of the cabin beside the clearing. Heavy wheels jolting over a mountain road. And Shirley Longworth sitting on a box beside the couch rigged in one corner of the wagon bed. Sitting there, watching Penland's face, watching for signs of danger, for flush and fever.

The watching was not necessary, now. Penland knew that. The kid had gotten him to the cabin and the girl had cleaned his wounds, just as she had done before. But it was neither of these things which had started him mending as no medicines could have done. It was not the knowledge that his risks had not been for nothing—that a ride through hell can make a good man of a pasty-faced kid. What made the painful knitting of his wounds bearable was the knowledge that Paul Penland, who had lacked a good beginning in life, had one now, on a Los Animas quarter section.

He looked up at Shirley Longworth and smiled. The wagon jolted over a rock in the trail and he winced. He thought of what MacKinlon had said, there in the pocket in the rocks.

"A woman can sure raise hell!" he said.

Shirley Longworth smiled, also. She leaned toward him. "She has to," she answered softly, "when she's breaking a pair of wild ones to harness. . . ."

THE END


## WHEN BLACK LIGHTNING STRUCK!

He woke up in a lonely, lightning-struck cabin, handcuffed to a back-shot bounty-hunter. . . . And only Big Frenchy Daw knew how he'd gotten there and how he could be gotten out—if he'd pay the price that would damn him to a fugitive's hell-on-earth! Read Walt Coburn's dramatic saga of a lone-wolf fighting man,

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# GRANGERS, GET YOUR GUNS!

## CHAPTER ONE

### Gunslinger's Past

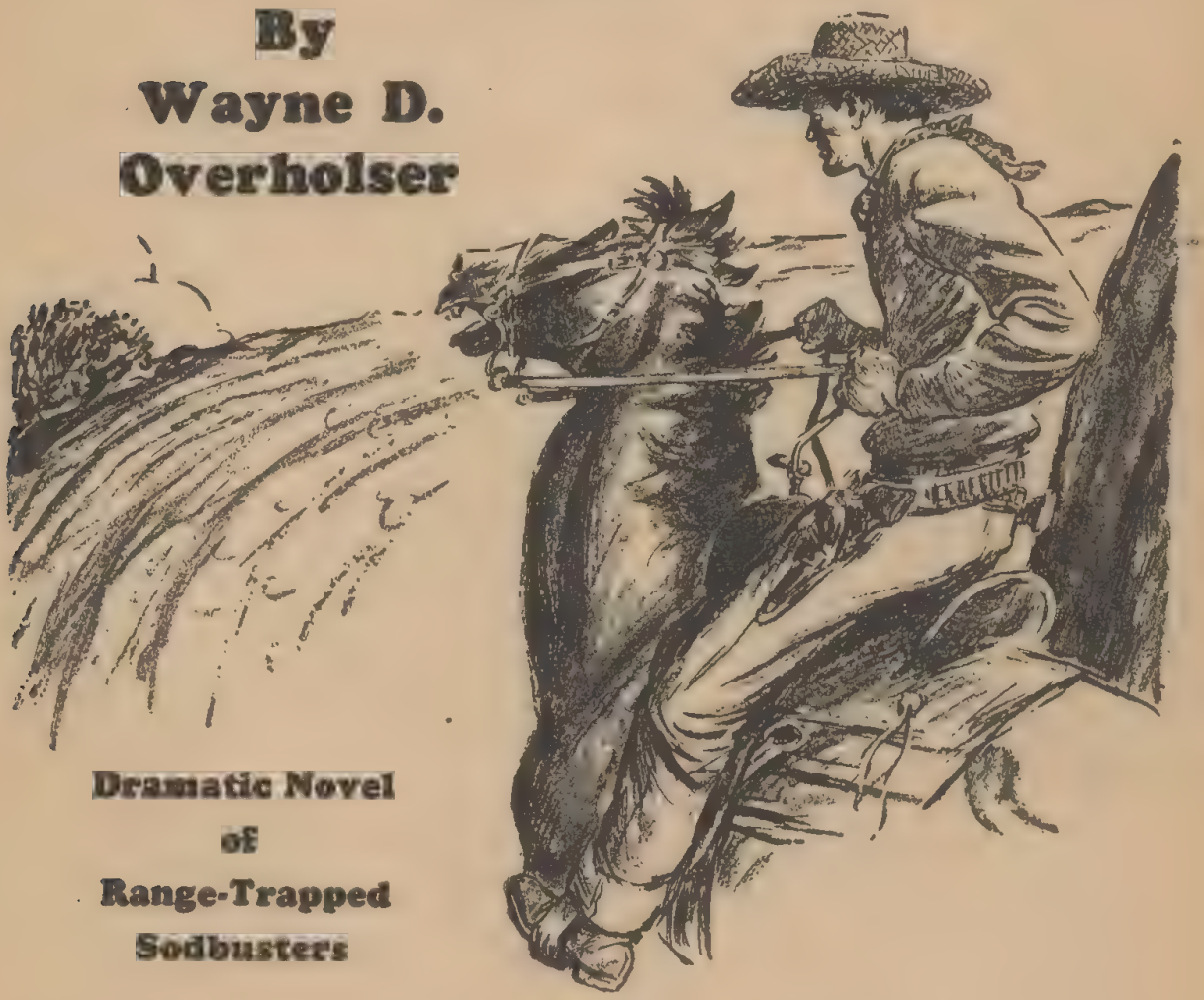
ED RAWLINS carried a sack of flour out of the Mercantile, dumped it into his wagon, and straightening his lank body, looked across the street squarely into the eyes of Bal Tilse. It had been a long time since he'd seen Tilse. He rutted back into his memory. Five years. . . . No, six—and he'd have been happier if it had been another six. His first impulse was to run, an impulse that died the instant it was born, for Ed Rawlins was not one to duck an issue.

It was not that he had anything against Tilse, for at one time the man had been his best friend. It was simply a case of Rawlins' smoky past being brought back to him in the form of Bal Tilse, a past that ran through the years like a frayed and tarnished ribbon. Rawlins, watching Tilse cross the street to him, thought grimly that Tilse was the last man he wanted to see. He thought, too, with

Kelton's scream rose above the roar of land-sliding rocks and dirt.

**When a gold-greedy land combine hired Ed Rawlins' quick-triggered ex-pardner to check-rein Ed's plow-pusher neighbors, his long Colt-furlough was over. . . . For he knew, with grim foreboding, that it was time to break the Purgatory Creek drought—by filling that ruinous dried-up stream-bed with the blood of honest sodbusters!**

# By Wayne D. Overholser



## Dramatic Novel of Range-Trapped Sodbusters

a sharp stab of regret, that a man's past is always with him, always haunting him and casting its long shadow across his future.

"Ed, you old, long-legged, smoke-eating son of sin," Tilse shouted, and held out a hand. "Sure is good to see you."

"It's good to see you," Rawlins lied, and shook Tilse's hand. "What are you doing here in Sills City?"

"Looking for a job—and for you. Heard you were here."

"You get a job?" Rawlins asked, and felt his stomach muscles knot. There was only one man in Sills City who would hire a gunslinger like Bal Tilse, and Rawlins knew the answer to his question before he asked it.

Tilse nodded. "Hired out to Ira Sills."

"Yeah, I know him," Rawlins murmured, and let it go at that.

Tilse cuffed his Stetson back, and stared at Rawlins, and Rawlins felt the disappointment and then the contempt that was in the man.

"You look like a farmer," Tilse said. "That don't make sense for a gent who had the fastest gun hand of any hombre I ever sided in a show-down."

"It don't make sense for a fact," agreed Rawlins mildly.

There was silence for a moment, both thinking of the years they had been together, and of that last ride through the blackness of an Arizona night with a dozen men not more than a jump behind them. They had parted

in the desert while the pursuit thundered on past, and Rawlins had not heard of Tilse from that moment to this. Now, clad in the heavy shoes, the overalls, cotton work shirt, and straw hat of a farmer Rawlins felt suddenly ashamed.

"It's damned funny," Tilse said, his green eyes narrowed. "I remember how I used to cuss a gun-fighter's life, claiming I'd like to settle down on a farm and watch things grow. And all the time you said I was a damned fool."

"I was a crazy kid," Rawlins murmured, "and you were old enough to know what you wanted."

"And now you're digging in the dirt, and I'm still drawing down gunslinger's pay." Tilse shook his head as if he couldn't believe this thing he saw.

"I'm just one of fifty farmers, Bal," Rawlins said, "who settled here on Purgatory Creek and took land under Sills' ditch. I'd like to remain that."

"Hell, you got nothing to be ashamed of," Tilse said sharply. "No use hiding your talents." He paused, eyes narrowing thoughtfully again as if his mind was trying to probe the mystery of this change in Rawlins. Bitterness came into him then. "I've been the fool, Ed, keeping on the dark trails half the time and wasting my life. I'm forty. Damned near ready to be an old man."

"I'm not so young, either, Bal. Well, I'll see you again."

Rawlins climbed into the wagon seat and picked up the lines. Tilse stared up at him, eyes still questioning. He asked softly, "You say this is Sills' land?"

Rawlins nodded. "State got it from the government under the Carey Act, and Sills has to put water on it."

"You get it free?"

"Not quite." Rawlins's lips tightened. "Fifteen dollars an acre."

"What the hell does he need gun-slingers for?" Tilse demanded. "I figgered he was having a scrap over water rights."

"No."

Tilse laid his hands on the front wheel, the sourness in him whetting an edge to his words. "I sure need a job, Ed, but I didn't figger that coming here would put us on opposite sides."

"Funny thing," Rawlins said, and clicked to his team.

Bal Tilse stood there in the street, staring after him, dark face still sour and a little puzzled.

It was strange what a man would do for a dream, Ed Rawlins told himself as he drove home. He thought now about his smoky years as he had not thought about them for a long time: empty years, filled with riding and shooting and killing, years when he'd earned big pay and spent it as fast as he'd earned it. Then there had been another, job after he'd left Tilse, and another fight, and he'd been shot to pieces. It had been the weeks in a hospital bed that had changed him. He hadn't buckled on his guns since that time, hadn't fought with a man since then. He'd worked, and saved his money, and now he was making a try for his own land here on the Purgatory.

IT wasn't the land, exactly, that was his dream. He drove into his farm yard and past the house to his barn, looking at the buildings, critically now, and weighing them against the possessions that Bal Tilse's life had brought him. They weren't much: the house was a one-room, tar-paper shack, the barn was made of pine logs he'd brought down from the Cascades, his garden was just coming up and was nothing but a promise.

He thought grimly of that. A promise? Nothing more, and unless Sills fixed the ditches so that he'd have more water than he'd had last year, it was a promise that would not be kept.

Rawlins put away his team, carried his groceries into the house and cooked dinner, but his mind was still on the past, still considering the forces that had made him what he was. It was partly the pain and nearness to death while he'd been in the hospital, but it was mostly Trudy Gilder, and what she meant to him. That was the dream: her love, a home, children. Those were the things that gave a solidity to life, a feeling of depth, a value to the bare struggle of living. And Trudy Gilder did not approve of fighting. She would give him back his ring if she knew what his past had been. Shock came to Rawlins with that thought. If Tilse told, and the story spread along Purgatory Creek, Trudy would hear.

Ed Rawlins was not a man to give way to panic. He fought it now, telling himself it wouldn't happen, that Tilse wouldn't tell. Yet he couldn't be sure, and the worry was still in him that afternoon when he was working on his mower and saw Jack Kelton and Lew Dosso ride in from the county road.

At first the sight of Ira Sills' two men did not mean anything to Rawlins. He straightened, laid the monkey wrench on the mower seat, and reached into his pocket for pipe and tobacco. He called an amiable, "Howdy, gents. Light down and rest your saddles."

They dismounted, and came toward him, neither speaking, and both, he saw, were a little drunk. Officially they were supposed to be some kind of construction men for the irrigation company, but Rawlins, who understood these things better than most of the folks along the Purgatory, knew that their real job was to smash opposition to Sills.

Kelton was a big, thick-shouldered man with sharp, black eyes that were surprisingly small for so large a face. Dosso was thin and stooped, with a huge beak of a nose and long-fingered hands that were deadly fast with the sixguns he wore. They made a good pair for Ira Sills, and were the principal reasons why none of the farmers had seriously kicked about the small and inadequate ditch system.

Rawlins wondered why neither spoke, but he didn't see their intent until they were close, and Kelton said, "We thought you were just a farmer, Rawlins—just a plain, ordinary, mud farmer."

Bal Tilse had wasted no time telling about his past. That was the first thought that came into Rawlins' mind as he slid the tobacco can back into his pocket and held a match to his pipe. Then a second thought struck him; this was trouble with a capital T and he wished his guns were on his hips instead of in the house.

"That's all I am," Rawlins said coolly, taking the pipe out of his mouth. "Just a farmer." He wondered why he'd thought about his guns, and remembering Trudy Gilder, knew he had to meet this threat without his guns.

"I hear different," Kelton said. "I hear you used to be a gun-fighter, a regular ring-tailed wowser. A real curly wolf from the forks of Bitter Crick!"

"Who have you been listening to?" Rawlins asked.

"Don't make no never-mind about that," Kelton snarled. "The point is, we don't want no trouble. You take fifty crazy mud farmers, get 'em heated up some, and you've got trouble. We ain't gonna have that, Rawlins."

"All right," Rawlins said. "We ain't gonna have trouble."

Lew Dosso had cocked his head, hard blue eyes on Rawlins. He said, "He could be a tough hand, Jack. Look at them gray eyes. And them long fingers. That quick way he's got of moving. Put a gun on his hip, and he could be hell on little red wheels."

"Rawlins, it don't make no sense for a gent who's been a gun-slinger to come here and take up land and act like a farmer." Kelton gestured with a meaty hand. "You're playing some kind of smart game. What is it?"

Rawlins' pipe had gone dead in his mouth. He tamped the tobacco down with a forefinger, eyes on Kelton and then Dosso, and held a match flame to it. He knew men like these two; knew that the only things they respected were a man's fists or the gun he carried. He blew out a cloud of smoke that hung for a moment in the still air. Then he said, "To hell with you. There's no smart game about it. I want to farm and be let alone. That's all."

But Jack Kelton had not ridden out here from Sills City to let him alone. He snarled "I think you're taking the farmers' pay, and when the time's right, you'll buckle on your hogleg and start raising hell."

"I haven't worn my guns for a long time, Kelton. Now suppose you mount up and git."

"Not yet, mister. I came out here to show you you'd better stay a farmer. Now I'm gonna show you."

Kelton lowered his head and came at Rawlins, great fists lashing out at Rawlin's face. It might have surprised a man who had less understanding of the caliber of those with whom he was dealing, but it did not surprise Ed Rawlins. He had laid his pipe down on the mower seat beside the monkey wrench. Now he stepped to one side, and struck Kelton a jarring blow on the side of the head.

Kelton let out a bellow that held more surprise than pain, wheeled, and rushed Rawlins again. This time Rawlins held his ground. They came together, hard, Rawlins punching savagely at Kelton's stomach, but weight was with Kelton, and he forced Rawlins back. They moved toward the mower, Kelton lashing at Rawlin's face, and Rawlins, seeing that it was Kelton's intention to back him against it and batter him into submission, suddenly swung away and brought a vicious right to the side of the man's face. Kelton went on, carried by his own impetus and the force of Rawlins's blow, and fell headlong against the mower, his head cracking sharply against the wheel.

Rawlins stepped back, bruised lips stretched in a grin. He asked, "What was that you was going to show me, Kelton?" It was then that Lew Dosso's gun barrel cracked against Rawlins's head and he spilled forward into the litter of the barnyard.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Friend—or Traitor

ED RAWLINS was still lying beside the mower when Trudy Gilder rode into the barnyard and found him. She was cradling his head on her lap when he came to. He stared into her face, shut his eyes, and when he opened them again, she was still there. He murmured, "An angel's face, but no harps. I always thought there was harp music in heaven."

"I'm no angel," Trudy said softly "but I thought for a minute you were. What happened?"

He told her as his fogged memory cleared. Then he said "You said once you hated men who settled trouble with guns."

She made no answer and when he looked at her, there was a small smile in the corner

of her lips. She was a pretty girl, this Trudy Gilder, with the darkest brown eyes Rawlins had ever seen, and hair as black as a crow's wing. Rawlins had seen pretty girls before, but he had never seen one like Trudy. He had often wondered what there was about her that set her apart from other women, and he had never been sure. He had always noted the great pride that she possessed, a sort of hewing-to-the-line quality that was in her, and now, looking up at her face he wondered if that was it.

Rawlins sat up rubbed his aching head and then got to his feet. He reeled uncertainly for a moment his head whirling, and grabbed at the mower seat to steady himself. He said, "I guess you're the kind of a person who never goes back on what she says, and it wouldn't be fair for me to go ahead letting you think I'm something I'm not. You're bound to hear it sometime anyhow."

"Don't tell me, Ed." She was on her feet now, facing him and there was a softness about her he had never seen before. "We're having a settlers' meeting tonight. Dad says it's important. That's what I came to tell you and I'm not interested in what you were. I'm only interested in what you are."

She kissed him then, a quick kiss that left a feeling of uncertainty in Rawlins, and turning from him, swiftly mounted and galloped away, a slim lithe figure who rode gracefully and well. Rawlins didn't stir until she had disappeared into the junipers. Then he walked to the house, still a little dizzy and sitting down on his front steps stared at the long skyline of the Cascades.

A week ago or even this morning, Rawlins would not have wished for his guns as he had when Kelton and Dosso rode up. He did not understand it. He had thought that life was entirely behind him, and Trudy had promised to marry him in the fall.

"One good crop," he had told her, "and we can build another room."

Now everything was different. Bal Tilse had done that to him; the contempt in the man's eyes was a stinging nettle across his brain. He got up, and went into the house. He stared at the trunk that held his guns, walked around the room, and came back to the trunk. He had asked Tilse not to tell about his past, but Tilse had told. Ira Sills had sent his men out to make threats when talk became a little too strong against the irrigation company, but this was the first time they had gone beyond the making of threats.

Lifting the lid of his trunk, Rawlins took out the gun belts. He buckled them around him, and the weight of them on his hips was good. He lifted each gun from holster, practised the draw, and finally slid them back into their casings, smiling in satisfaction. Gun magic, once learned as Ed Rawlins had learned it, was not easily forgotten.

Reluctantly Rawlins unbuckled the gun belts and put them back into the trunk. They weren't the way. Not yet. He fed his chickens and pigs, milked his cow, cooked supper, and shaved. He didn't know what the settlers' meeting was about, and he didn't know what Ira Sills had in mind, but he knew one thing. He wanted to lay his hands on Bal Tilse. He saddled his horse, anger slowly rising in him until it had reached the boiling point by the time he rode into Sills City.

The sun lay just above the Cascades when Rawlins tied his horse in front of the Jubilee Bar. He shouldered through the batwings, thinking that the saloon was the most likely place to find Tilse, and seeing in one quick glance that he'd been right. Bal Tilse stood halfway along the bar talking to Ira Sills, and, except for the barkeep, they were the only men in the saloon. Rawlins came quickly along the bar, laid a hand on Tilse's shoulder, and brought him around, hard.

"It's a hell of a thing," Rawlins said, anger honing a sharpness to his voice, "when you see an old friend for the first time in six years and that friend rushes off as fast as his legs can carry him to blat all he knows."

"Hell, Ed," Tilse said defensively. "I told you there was nothing to be ashamed of."

"No, I'm not ashamed of anything I did then, Bal, and I'm not ashamed of what I'm doing now. But mebbe you're ashamed of your double-jointed tongue that got me a beating."

"What are you talking about?" Tilse demanded.

Rawlins told him, and added, "Sills, I'd like to know what you had in mind when you sent that pair of quick-triggering saddle bums to my place."

IRA SILLS was small and shrewd and smooth. He had a way of making people trust him, and he had somehow been able to duck trouble the summer before when there hadn't been a farmer on the creek whose crops had had enough water. He studied Rawlins a moment before he answered, his dark eyes narrowed. Then, with unexpected frankness, he answered: "When a gunman moves into this project, I feel better when I know he's on my side. I don't want trouble, Rawlins, and I'm hoping the sample the boys showed you this afternoon will encourage you to move —or at least to watch your step."

"You don't know me very well, Sills."

The promoter shrugged. "There are other ways of handling a difficult situation, Rawlins. It strikes me that a man with your background would not be here posing as a farmer unless there was something in the wind."

"You wouldn't understand a man wanting to settle down, would you, Sills?"

"No, not your kind of a man," Ira Sills said.

Rawlins swung back to face Tilse. "Now you can talk, Bal, and you'd better make it good. Why did you run off at the mouth about me?"

"Don't start talking tough to me," Tilse said with sudden anger.

"I am talking tough, mister—but I'm still waiting to hear why you gabbed to Sills."

"When I hire out to a man," Tilse snarled, "I give him more than my gun. I thought Sills ought to know who you were, and I'm like him. I smell something that ain't in the open, and before we're done I'm gonna find out what it is."

Of all the men Rawlins had known, he had once liked Bal Tilse the best. Now, looking at the gunman, he saw that there was nothing of the old feeling left. What had been a fine and strong friendship lay between them as shriveled and useless as a brown autumn leaf. Tilse was as much his enemy, now, as Lew Dosso or Jack Kelton.

"You think that a man like Sills deserves your loyalty more than a man who once fought beside you?"

"Hell, yes," Tilse snapped. "I like a man to be open and above board. You're not. I said I would find out what kind of sneaking game you're up to, and by God—"

Rawlins hit him then, a short, powerful blow that caught Tilse on the side of the face and knocked him flat on his back. Tilse lay there a moment, eyes staring up at Rawlins as if not understanding this.

"A man doesn't have to take that," Sills said.

Slowly Tilse's hand came up to his cheek and touched the spot where Rawlins's fist had hit him. Then, his face was scarlet, he raised himself up on his left elbow, his right hand yanking his gun.

"You've gone down a long ways, Bal," Rawlins said, "when you'll draw on a man who isn't packing a gun."

The gun was leveled in Tilse's hand. It stayed that way for a long moment, Tilse's lips twitching with the struggle that was going on in him.

Sills, moving cautiously out of the line of fire, said, "Go ahead and drill him, Tilse. Be no witnesses but me and the barkeep, and we'll tell the right story for you."

Slowly Tilse came to his feet, the gun still in his hand, his decision not yet made. Rawlins laughed softly. "You're a better man than you think you are, Bal. You're so good that you won't be working long for a man of Sills's caliber."

It was then that Sills's office man parted the batwings, and called, "They're out here, Boss."

"All right." Sills moved away, thrusting roucous glance at Rawlins. "I've got a lot at stake in this thing, Rawlins, and I won't let it go up in smoke. I'm hoping you won't be a damned fool and throw your life away on a fight you don't have to make."

Excitement stabbed through Ed Rawlins. The grin that broke across his bronzed, bony face held a cold challenge. "I haven't been in a fight for a long time, Sills, but I'm in this one—right up to my ears."

"If you aim to fight, you'd better start packing those guns you're supposed to be so good with," Sills retorted. "And you'd better be damned sure you have them before you meet up with Tilse again." With that, Sills motioned curtly to Tilse, and left the saloon.

A heavy sigh came out of the barkeep as the batwings flapped shut behind Sills and Tilse. He said, "Ed, I know Ira Sills pretty well. I know how far he will go—and in case you don't know it, you're in trouble."

"What do you mean?"

The barkeep began mopping the mahogany, his lips compressed. He said, "I own this saloon, Ed, and it's a town where I'd like to spend the rest of my life. I think the future of this country depends on farmers who are making a good living here, and not on a bunch of them a promoter like Sills brings in because he's got a lot of land he wants settled. That's all I'm gonna say, except for one thing. Watch your back."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Pilgrims' Choice

WHEN Rawlins left the saloon, he saw the hack, the load of men in it pull away from the walk in front of the hotel and take the road that led to the lower creek country. His farm was there, and so was Walt Gilder's. and half a dozen others that were the best kept and most prosperous looking farms along the Purgatory.

Bal Tilse was driving the hack and Ira Sills was in the back seat. The other men in it were strangers who had probably just come in from Casburg. Rawlins stood thoughtfully loading his pipe, and watched the hack until it disappeared. The sun was halfway down behind the Cascades now, and there was little of the day left by which these strangers could see the country, but Ira Sills, good talker that he was, didn't need much day to show these men what he wanted them to see along the Purgatory, and get them signed up for eighty acres of land apiece.

Rawlins crossed the street and went into

the hotel. He sat down, feet cocked up on a chair in front of him, and pulling steadily at his pipe, gave thought to this thing as he saw it now. He had shirked his responsibility, and shame was in him because of it. He had not gone to any of the settlers' meetings, he had paid little attention to Ira Sills' moves, and, except for exchanging a little work with Walt Gilder and courting Trudy, he had lived within himself almost entirely.

It had been wrong, all wrong, and he saw it now as he had not seen it before. He had the choice of running, which was what Sills wanted him to do, or of staying and conducting a one-man fight against Sills. His chances of winning that fight were close to zero. He had been through too many not to take cognizance of the odds. He needed help, but whether the farmers would listen to him, and whether they'd fight if they did listen, was something he seriously doubted.

Rawlins was still in the hotel lobby when darkness came, and lights bloomed along the street. The hack stopped in front of the hotel, and the strangers got down, talked for a time with Sills, and then came in while the hack wheeled away. Rawlins stepped in front of them, and asked, "Are you men thinking of taking land here?"

They were farmers, blunt-fingered men with faces weathered by wind and sun. They were much like other settlers who lived along the Purgatory, big-muscled men who felt a little cramped in their store clothes.

"That's right," one of them answered. "We're from Wagontown, on the other side of the hump. We figgered it was time we quit renting and started in owning our land."

"Has anybody told you we didn't get the water we needed last year?" Rawlins asked.

The men exchanged quick glances, and nodded as if expecting this. The spokesman said, "I don't know why men who live here now would try to discourage further settlement, but I'm telling you something, mister. All the big talk you put out won't stop us. More than that, it won't stop a thousand others from crossing the mountains to live here. We like the looks of this country, and we're staying."

They started around him as if satisfied that he'd been told enough, but Rawlins wasn't finished. He stepped in front of them again, and said, "You owe it to yourselves to come to the settlers' meeting tonight."

"It would be a waste of time," one of the men said sullenly. "We were told by Mr. Sills that there is a group of settlers here who want to hog this whole segregation, and are doing all they can to buck him and discourage others who want to come. Well, we'll have no part of it. Now if you'll step aside, we'll go to our rooms.

Rawlins watched them go up the stairs and muttereds, "Fools! Damned, stubborn fools!"

With their life savings in their pockets and bent on spending it," a man behind Rawlins said. As Rawlins turned the man held out his hand. "The name's McCann. Sam McCann from Portland."

"Ed Rawlins," Rawlins said, as he shook hands. "I guess I've just got a talent for sticking my nose into other men's business. Only thing is the more of those yahoos who come in, the less water there is for the rest of us."

McCann was a tall, lantern-jawed man with corn-colored hair that successfully pointed in several directions. He had a pencil thrust behind one ear, several sheets of paper were stuffed into a coat pocket, and his general appearance was that of an animated scarecrow. He studied Rawlins for a moment. Finally he said, "I've heard of you. You're the farmer who's had quite a past as a gun-slinger, aren't you?"

"That's right," Rawlins answered. "That story seems to have traveled."

"Sounds like a good story," McCann said. "I'm a reporter, Rawlins, and I've always got my ears open for something that's good. It strikes me this is good."

"There's nothing about my life that would make a good story," Rawlins murmured, and moving toward the door, went through it and turned toward the schoolhouse.

"All right," McCann said, and caught up with Rawlins. "We'll let your life story go, but I think you'll help me do the job I'm down here for. You know, of course, that these irrigation projects around Cassburg make up a huge amount of acreage, and will furnish homes for thousands of people if properly operated."

"Which this one isn't," Rawlins snapped.

"I was wondering," McCann persisted, "about that very thing. Now around Cassburg everything seems to be in order, but it's Ira Sills who does most of the advertising, and I expect a thousand families to move in here before fall."

"Look, McCann." Rawlins paused, and faced the reporter. "How can a thousand families make a living here when we didn't get enough water last summer?"

"Perhaps they won't, but they're like these men you just talked to. They have some money saved, and they want to own their land. That money will go into Ira Sills's hands, and their starving is not a problem that will worry Mr. Sills."

"I guess you've about got it," Rawlins agreed sourly. He told McCann about Kelton and Dosso visiting him that afternoon, and added, "I guess that was Sills' way of trying to get me out of the country."

"Rawlins, it looks like the beginning of a story here. If I had a good one, I'd splash it across the front page of my paper, and it would be read all over the Northwest. That's the only way I know to stop these people from believing Sills' advertising."

"You want a good story, do you, McCann?" Rawlins said softly. "All right, I'll give you one, but you may not live long enough to print it. Come along. We'll go see what this settlers meeting is all about."

THE schoolhouse was jammed. Rawlins, pushing his way through the crowd that stood just inside the door, saw that most of the fifty settlers living along Purgatory Creek were here. They were a somber-faced lot, the women and children filling the seats, the men standing around the back of the room and along the sides.

Walt Gilder, president of the Purgatory Creek Settlers' Association, pounded on the desk in front of the room, and Rawlins, jostled to one side by late-comers, saw Lew Dosso and Jack Kelton on one side of him, and Bal Tilse on the other. Sills' office man was there, but Sills was not.

Gilder told the secretary to read the minutes of the last meeting, and after he'd sat down, Gilder asked if there was any new business to be brought up. The crowd shifted, shuffling feet and the ripple of talk making a restlessness in the room. Gilder pounded for order, and tried to glower, but a successful glower was not in Walt Gilder. He was a little, red-cheeked man who looked more like Santa Claus than he did a farmer, but the spirit of resistance was in him, and it was Rawlins' feeling that Gilder was one of the few in the room who could be counted on if it came to a finish fight.

"Well," Gilder said, "this here meeting was called for a definite purpose, and the sooner we get to discussing it, the better. We 'bout starved last summer, and things don't look too good this year. A sink hole showed up on the other side of the butte so the settlers on that lateral didn't get water for a week. The company was too busy to fix it, so some of us took a day off and did it ourselves. Seeing as this project is supposed to be supervised by the state, it appears to me that it's time for us to make a kick to the right people. Now I'd like to hear some discussion."

Again there was that shifting of bodies and scraping of feet, but no one wanted to talk. Rawlin's looking at the crowd, saw there would be no determined resistance from them.

"Most of you come quite a piece to get here," Gilder said testily. "You gonna sit here like a bunch of wooden heads just 'cause you're scared of Ira Sills' toughs?"

A man jumped up. "We shouldn't talk that way in meeting, Walt. Mebbe we just better wait through the summer, and see what kind of service we'll get."

"The ditches aren't any bigger than they were last summer," Gilder snapped, "and they didn't carry enough water then."

Jack Kelton grinned broadly and nudged Lew Dosso. On the other side of the room, Bal Tilse watched Rawlins. Sam McCann growled an oath in Rawlins' ear, and said, "They're scared to open their mouths."

"All right," Gilder said in disgust. "Might as well adjourn the meeting. But at least go home and think about it. Mebbe you figger you can hang on till hell freezes over, but I can't. I've got to have a crop if me and my girls are gonna eat."

"Walt," Rawlins said, and stepped forward. "I've got something to say."

Walt Gilder grinned. "Go ahead," he said. "You sure got the floor in this meeting."

The women and children turned to see who it was, and for the first time Rawlins saw that Trudy was there. Indecision halted him for a minute. Trudy wouldn't like what he was going to say. Then he gritted his teeth, put his hands on the back of the seat in front of him, and began to talk.

"The way I see this thing," he began, "it isn't so much a proposition of enlarging the ditches and telling the State about what's going on as it is informing the people who might be settlers that there just ain't enough water in Purgatory Creek to go around. There's four men at the hotel who were taken out to see some farms by Ira Sills this afternoon. Now they want to settle here. What's more, they got sore because I told them we didn't get the water we was supposed to last summer. They said there'd be a thousand others crossing the mountains to settle here. I'm asking you men just where would we or Ira Sills or anybody else can find the water to irrigate the thirty thousand acres that Sills has in this segregation?"

"There never was that much water in Purgatory Creek," Gilder nodded.

"Sills know that," Rawlins went on. "A while ago somebody said we shouldn't talk about Sills' toughs. Now mebbe we oughta be scared out of our shirts. I oughta be, because they came out to my place and beat me up today. I'm scared, all right, but I'm gonna make my holler just the same. I'm gonna holler so loud that these suckers coming in are going to find out this valley ain't just what Ira Sills tells 'em it is."

The issue that faced the settlers had never been put into words the way Ed Rawlins had just put it, and Ira Sills's name had never been publicly mentioned before. It seemed to all the settlers except Walt Gilder that it was something like treason to talk this way, and

for a long moment there was only silence: tight, tense, and filled with a grim foreboding.

Jack Kelton wasn't grinning now. He made a step toward Rawlins, but Lew Dosso whispered something in his ear, and the two of them pushed their way through the crowd and left the schoolhouse. Bal Tilse still watched Rawlins, his lean face puzzled and uncertain.

"Anybody else got something to say?" Gilder demanded. "When you got a man with Ed Rawlins' spunk in the crowd, there oughta be somebody else who's got enough guts to back him."

"I don't call it spunk," a man shouted. "He's a gun-fighter—a killer. We all got that word today, and I'm thinking he's here for some purpose that ain't good. I never seen him at a settlers' meeting before."

"Neither did I," another called out.

"Gun-fighters thrive on trouble," a third man yelled. "Might be this is his way of getting a job. We've got wives and kids, but Ed Rawlins ain't."

"You're a bunch of old women," Walt Gilder roared. "Damn, yellow-backed old women who are scared of your shadow! I'm resigning this here job you gave me. I think I'm a man, and I know danged well I don't want no office in an outfit that—"

A gun blazed outside, the slug slapping through a window. Again it roared. The two wall lamps winked out. A flame leaped ceilingward, caught a curtain, and seemed to explode.

*Fire!* The cry came out of the men, shrill and scared, and panic was upon them as they broke for the door. Some thought of their families, some only for themselves. Rawlins knocked a man down with his fist who plunged for the door. At the same instant he shouted: "Keep that door clear, you fools! Let the women and children out first."

But Ed Rawlins might as well have tried to stop a stampede.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Gun-Guard for a Reporter

MEN jammed into the doorway, wedged tight, and could not move. Bal Tilse, cursing and swinging his gun barrel, battered men out of the way and somehow cleared the doorway. Rawlins, McCann, and Gilder got to the windows on the side away from the fire, kicked glass from the frames, and helped the children and then the women through.

Within a matter of minutes the schoolhouse was empty, and barely in time. Rawlins stood in the fringe of light, an arm around Trudy, and watched the walls cave in, a great column of sparks and flames rising skyward.

"Awful lucky," Sam McCann muttered.

"Won't be no school for our kids this winter," a man said.

"We'll build another one," Walt Gilder shouted.

"You donate the labor, and I'll put up the money." It was Ira Sills, standing there not ten feet from Ed Rawlins. "Education for our children is the most important thing we have. Whatever happens, we must not let it go."

A smart move, Rawlins thought; the sort of move that could be expected from Sills and one that would make it doubly hard to get any sort of cooperation from the settlers. Whether Dosso and Kelton had fired the shots upon Sills's orders, or whether it had been their own notion, was something Rawlins would never know, but he had a hunch that the idea was to plunge the schoolhouse into darkness and produce a panic for the purpose of stopping the discussion Gilder and Rawlins had started. Probably the fire was a result they had not foreseen, but in any case, Sills had cleverly turned it to his advantage.

"If your gun-slingers hadn't started the fire, Sills," Rawlins said, "you wouldn't have to put up the money."

"Can you prove who fired those shots?" Sills demanded.

"No, but Dosso and Kelton left the schoolhouse just before the shots were fired."

Sills laughed scornfully. "That proves nothing! As a matter of fact, they came over to my office to report about this sink hole we failed to fix. I'm sorry about that, but we were busy at the time. We'll see it doesn't happen again, even if we have to double our maintenance crew."

"You'd better keep your mouth shut, Rawlins," a man cried. "We've got kids to go to school, and you ain't. I think that's a fine offer Mr. Sills has just made."

Rawlins said softly, "Come along, McCann. You, too, Walt," and holding Trudy's arm, he beat a path for her through the crowd toward the hotel. Always before Rawlins had fought for pay, and the men who had hired him and those who had fought beside him had given him complete cooperation. He was not fighting for pay now; it was a common fight where all their interests were the same, and yet there was no cooperation at all. There was even resentment among the settlers because he wanted to fight.

"You can't get those men to fight, Rawlins," McCann said. "They don't understand."

"The damned fools!" Gilder said heatedly.

They were in front of the hotel, the light from the window falling across Trudy's face, and pride came into Ed Rawlins then. He was proud of this girl who had promised to marry him, proud of their dreams.

He asked, "Are you mad, Trudy?"

"No," she answered quickly. "But what are you going to do now?"

"What I do depends a little on McCann." He motioned to the reporter. "He said he would spread our story all over the front page of his paper, if it was a good one. What about it, McCann?"

"It's a good one, Rawlins." The reporter grinned. "A damned good one, and that fire was what made it extra good. I'm hiring a rig to take me to Cassburg in the morning so I can catch the stage to Shaniko." He pulled the pencil down from his ear and reached for the paper in his pocket. "Right now I want a few facts about the total acreage in the segregation, the size of the present farms, the amount of water in the Purgatory, and so on."

"Walt can give that to you," Rawlins said. "Trudy, let's go home. Where's your horse?"

"In front of the Mercantile."

"I'm glad to have met you, Rawlins." McCann shook Rawlins' hand. "It's a funny thing in this State. On the other side of the Cascades life goes on just about as it has for generations. Over here it's new and tough and damned near primitive. That's why these folks who come from there are a little slow seeing that they have to do their own fighting. Give them time, Rawlins. Meanwhile, I'll give you a story that'll put a crimp in Mr. Sills' plans."

"Thanks, McCann," Rawlins said, and crossed the street to his horse.

THERE was little talk between Rawlins and Trudy on the way home, but after her horse had been put away, they faced each other in front of her house, her face a pale oval in the darkness.

Rawlins said, "I wanted to tell you this afternoon what I'd been, but now you know. Does it make any difference?"

"I told you then it's what you are now that counts, Ed," the girl said softly, "not what you were when you rode with Bal Tilse. I'm proud of you and what you did tonight."

"It may not be over," Rawlins said somberly. "Sills is afraid of me or he wouldn't have sent Kelton and Dosso after me. After what I said tonight, he'll have to get me. I know about men like him, Trudy. I know how they work. They have to keep going, have to keep folks iced into line, or they're done."

She was silent a moment as if thinking about it, and then she said, "I guess I've felt the way I do because of Dad. We've been through these things before, and he always fights just like he's fighting now. He'll get killed, Ed. And if you die, too, then there'll be nothing left. I lost a brother three years ago. He was shot in the back and left in the sagebrush to die. It was like this. I can't stand to go through it again."

"But is there any sense in losing the things you've dreamed about and worked for just because you won't fight for them?" he asked roughly.

"Forty years ago people out here had to do those things. It was fight or die. That was the life people lived and they knew it and understood it. It's different now. If I'm going to have your children, Ed, I want them growing up in a world that can give them security."

"They'll never have security on the Purgatory if we don't fight for it now," he said stubbornly.

She started to say something, and whirled away instead and ran to the house. Rawlins waited until he heard the door slam, and then mounted and rode away, the feeling in him that a man has when he sees his life's treasure slipping out of his hand and is powerless to hold it.

Rawlins made his bed outside that night, his guns loaded and beside him on the ground. Sills' next move would be fast and ruthless, and there was no sense in dying in his shack like a trapped rat. The settlers would not fight now, but they would if driven far enough, and another crop failure might touch off the dynamite.

It was dawn when Rawlins awoke, and the thought that had been in his mind when he went to sleep was still there, and with it was another thought. Sills would kill Walt Gilder. Rawlins swore he had been so sure Sills would strike at him first, that he had forgotten Walt completely. He latched his belt around him, saddled his horse, and started back toward Gilder's place, cursing himself for not having foreseen Sills' move sooner. Rawlins did not hold the settlers' trust; Walt Gilder did, and for that reason Gilder was more dangerous in the long run to Ira Sills' plans.

The light was still thin when Rawlins, topping a ridge north of his farm, saw the vague form of a rider, then heard the muffled thud of fast-traveling hoofs in the sandy soil. Rawlins reined off the road and pulled gun, despair and then cold fury rising in him. He had been too late! That was his first thought. This rider had killed Walt Gilder, and was coming on after him.

Rawlins waited a full five minutes until the rider was within fifty feet of him. Then he reined into the road, his gun cocked, and called, "Pull up."

It was Bal Tilse who yanked his horse to a stop. He said, "Easy on that trigger, Ed," and made no move for his gun.

"What you doing here?" Rawlins asked.

Tilse laid a steady gaze on Rawlin's face. "I'm a fool, Ed, the damnedest, most muddle-headed fool that ever walked this earth! I figgered when I heard you was here that you were holding down some gun-slinging job, and I had an idea to get you to throw in with me and we'd do a little bounty chasing. Then I got here, and found out you wasn't even packing a gun, you were just a farmer, and I got sore. I guess I wasn't so sore at you as I was myself. You were doing the thing I'd always wanted to do, Ed, and I'm so damned small I pretended to think you'd gone plumb to the bottom."

Bal Tilse wasn't lying. Rawlins saw that, and he asked softly, "What set you straight?"

"It's like you said in the Jubilee. I'm too good a man to be working for a skunk like Sills. I lost my head after you walloped me, and pulled my gun. Sills wanted me to smoke you down. I guess that started it. Then that business of burning the schoolhouse. A lot of people might have got burned to death, and what Sills is after ain't worth it. Sills was up all night thinking what he was gonna do. He got me and Dosso and Kelton up about an hour ago and gave us our orders. I was supposed to come out here and bushwhack Walt Gilder, then get you. Ed, I've done some killing, but by hell, I never bushwhacked a man in my life, and Ira Sills don't have enough money to get me to."

"What about Dosso and Kelton?"

"Dosso heard what you and Gilder and McCann said in front of the hotel. He'd told Sills, and Sills says the one thing that can beat him is for a big daily like McCann's paper to run that story. Kelton is to drive the rig this morning, and he'll have a team that ain't broke. About the time they get to the top of the grade on the other side of the Purgatory, Dosso will cut loose with a few shots, and scare the team. Kelton makes a jump, and the rig will go over the grade."

"When are they pulling out?"

"They're probably gone before now."

"Bal, how are you playing this game from here on in?"

"Son, I'm right behind you! And when this is all buttoned up, if you want a partner who don't know nothing but trigger-pulling, I'm with you."

"You're signed up, Bal." Rawlins held out his hand, and Tilse shook it. "If we ride straight for the creek, we'll probably beat Kelton's rig to the foot of the grade. Chances are Dosso is forted up behind a lava pile that's just north of where the road comes over the rim. If you can get McCann out of that buggy, I'll handle Dosso."

"I'll do it," Tilse promised.

They stayed together until they reached the creek, and Rawlins said, "You'd better hit for the road, Bal. Good luck."

TILSE grinned, and swung upstream. Rawlins rode as nearly straight up the east wall of the canyon as he could, angling among boulders, and gradually working downstream to where an ancient tributary had worn a passage through the rimrock that lifted a sheer thirty feet above Rawlins.

It brought Rawlins to the plateau above the Purgatory about two miles downstream from where Lew Dosso would be holed up, a long way around but the only way because if he had tried to come up the road he'd have been shot out of his saddle by Dosso before he reached the plateau, and there was no other break through the sheer cliffs on the east side of the Purgatory for ten miles.

Rawlins paused to blow his horse, and saw the buggy across the creek and start up the grade. Bal Tilse was not in sight, and for a moment Rawlins felt doubt break across his mind. Ira Sills might have set up a bushwhack trap, using Bal Tilse to lure Rawlins into it. Then he put it from his mind. He had gone too far now to doubt Tilse.

Making a swing into the junipers away from the rim, Rawlins came presently to the road and turned toward the Purgatory, his gun palmed. It was then that gunfire blasted apart the morning quiet, and Rawlins thought he was too late. He saw Dosso the same instant the gunman saw him, and they fired together. He made a high target in the saddle, and there was only Dosso's head and shoulders above the lava, but Dosso, surprised by Rawlins' sudden appearance and the firing from the canyon, missed his first shot and paid the penalty for having missed. His second shot was nothing more than a finger twitching in death, the slug burying itself in the dirt below him. Rawlins' bullet had caught him between the eyes.

There was no more firing from the road below Rawlins, but he heard the run of horses, and he put spurs to his own mount. He came around the first bend in the grade, saw the approaching team running hard, Kelton hanging to the lines and weaving drunkenly in the seat. Rawlis reined his mount toward the bank, and then a cry came from him, for the team swung too near the edge, loose dirt giving way under them, and then plunged off into space, Kelton's scream rising above the roar of land-sliding rocks and dirt.

Bal Tilse came into sight, his cocked gun in his hand, saw Rawlins looking over the edge, and called, "What happened?"

"Dosso's dead, and Kelton just went off. It ain't a pretty sight, Bal. A hell of a way to die, even for Jack Kelton."

"He had one of my slugs in him," Tilse said. "I beat 'em to the foot of the grade, came part way up, and pulled in behind a pile of rocks. When they got close, I rode out and covered Kelton, telling McCann to jump. McCann jumped, but Kelton allowed he'd smoke it out with me. I reckon he was shot up so bad he couldn't hang on to his team."

McCann was waiting for them in the road, puzzled and angry, and when he saw Rawlins, he shouted, "Life over here isn't primitive, Rawlins. It's just plain savage. By the time I get done writing my story, there won't be anybody but tough hands who'd want to live over here."

"You still figger you've got a good story?" Rawlins asked.

A grin spread across McCann's dusty face. "Mister, I had enough of a story last night, but it gets better all the time. Fact is, I don't think I'd live long if it got any better than it is now."

"You're lucky you're alive this long," Rawlins said dryly. "You ride my horse, McCann, or you won't get to Cassburg in time to catch the stage. Bal, you'd better ride with him. Tell the deputy in Cassburg what happened."

"I ain't stopping in Cassburg, Ed," Tilse said. "I'm going plumb to Portland with this gent, and I'm not coming back until I've got a copy of the paper with this story in headlines a foot high."

"You'll get them," McCann promised.

It was late that afternoon when Rawlins stopped at the Gilder farm. Trudy was making a strawberry pie, and there was a patch of flour across her forehead that made Rawlins grin and hand her a towel and call her "dirty face."

"Stay for supper," Trudy said, "and while you're waiting, tell me what happened."

"You're sure something's happened?"

"It's written all over you," she said. "Go on."

He told her, then, and added: "I had a little talk with Sills when I came through town. I never saw him scared before, but when he found out that Dosso and Kelton were dead, he was plenty scared. Then I topped that off with telling him that Tilse will tell what he planned for me and your dad, and Sills started begging. He may go to jail before it's over, but he's sure going to sell out here."

"If Tilse hadn't been the man he was," Trudy mused, "you and Dad would have been murdered."

"That's right, but after I hit Bal yesterday, Sills figgered he'd enjoy beefing me. It goes to prove that there's different levels of honor in all occupations, which same is true with gun-fighting like everything else. I knew about Tilse, but I wasn't sure when he'd find it out." He came to her then, and took her hands in his. Her eyes went down to his guns and when they lifted to his face, he asked, "What's the answer, Trudy?"

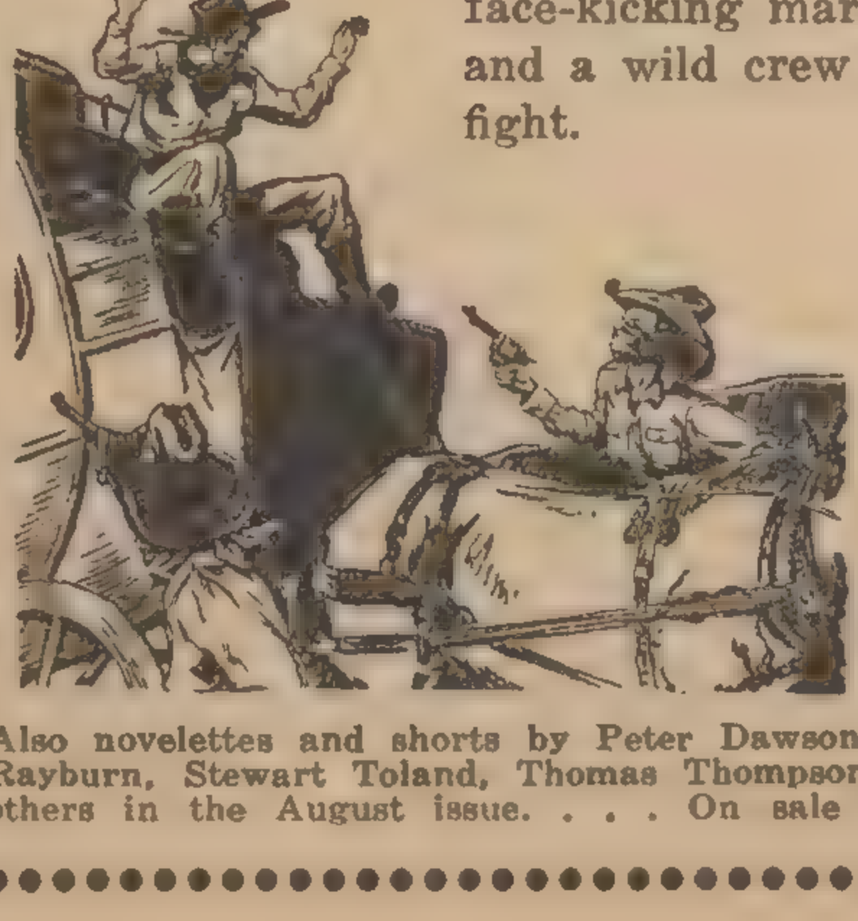
"You're right," she said simply. "I didn't see it until you said last night that if our children were to have security here, we had to fight for it—now. I'm proud of you, Ed."

He kissed her then. "Maybe we'd better not wait for that room," he grinned.

She smiled. "I'll be ready, Ed—tomorrow."

THE END


# OLD DEVIL HASSETT RIDES THE MAIL



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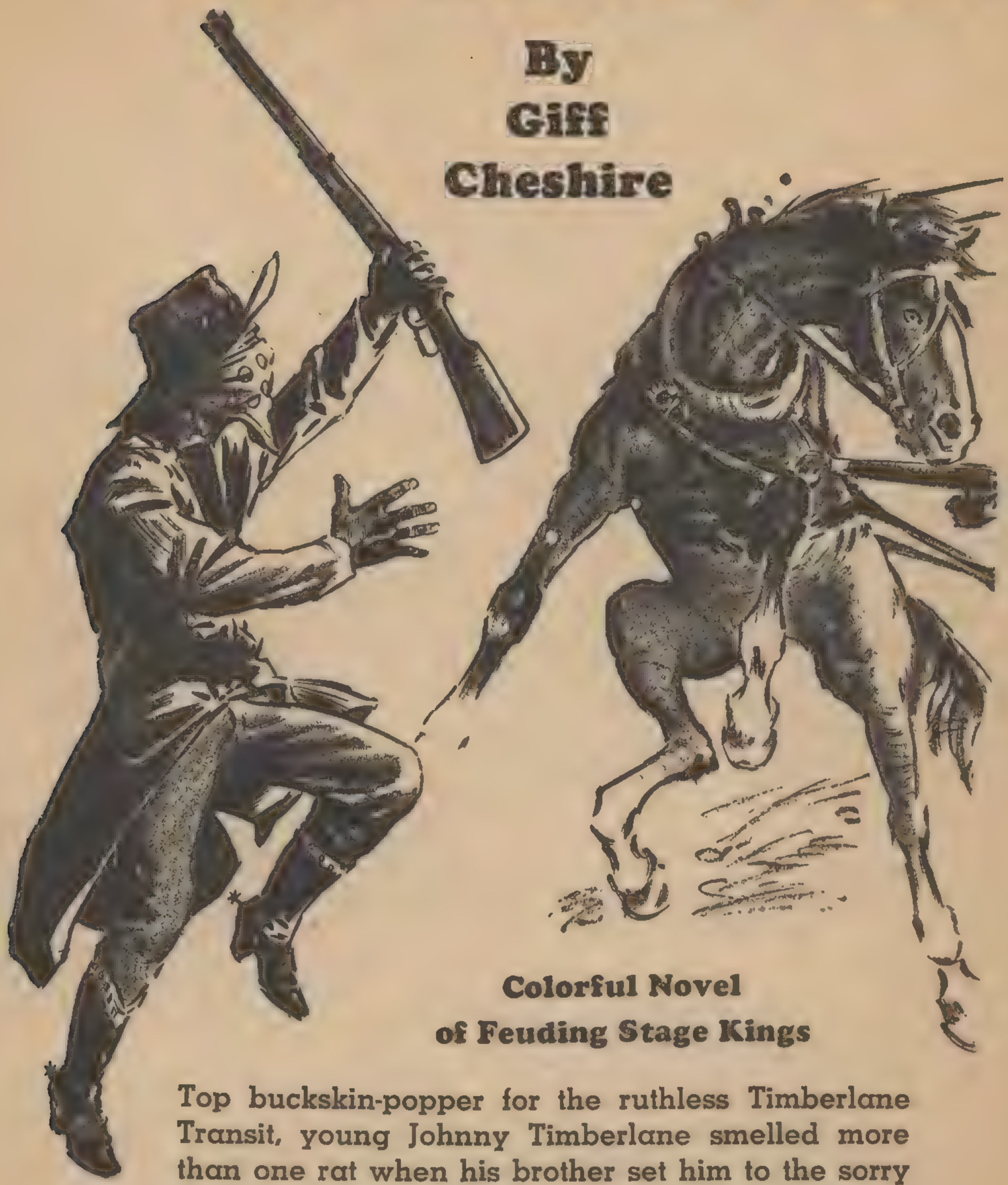
# WHIP IN HIS FIST,



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# LEAD IN HIS BACK!

The horses spooked violently.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Whit Cracks the Whip

JOHNNY was crossing the dimly lighted, muddy street toward the big yard of the Timberlane Transit Company when the buggy bearing old Charley Frazer wheeled into town. The driver saw him and pulled up. "Hey, Johnny! Find Doc Kibbee and fetch him over to Frazers'. Charley's busted his leg." It was Ed Meredith, from out Barnes Creek way, and the man was excited.

"What happened, Ed?"

"Stage run away on the Barnes Creek grade. Found it smashed to smithereens, and I had to shoot one of the horses. Charley was lucky he wasn't killed. Lucky I came along. I brung the mail in, too."

The old man in the seat beside Meredith did not speak. The buggy whirled away, and Johnny Timberlane was frowning as he went to hunt up the doctor. He found him at home and went on over to the Frazers' with him. Meredith had carried old Charley into the house, and a white-faced but efficient Isabel was getting him into bed. She looked at Johnny with a puzzled expression in her pretty, amber eyes. Johnny helped her with her father, and afterward he assisted the doctor in setting the leg. With no more that a stiff slug of whisky to fortify him, Charley Frazer took it without a groan.

Johnny hung around until both Meredith and the doctor had gone, then he asked gruffly: "Now, exactly what happened, Charley?" He tried to keep from showing the worry that was crowding his mind.

"Like Ed said. The hosses run away."

"But what scared 'em?"

After a thoughtful moment the old man grunted: "A jigger popped out of the brush and waved his hands. Danged good thing I didn't have a passenger or somebody might have been killed."

"Who was the jigger?"

"Couldn't tell. Wore a rain coat and had his hat pulled over his eyes and I was busy. Mebbe it was just some drunk hillbilly who figured it'd be fun to throw a scare into me."

"Yeah, mebbe." Johnny didn't believe it, and he was puzzled that this thing could set such a sense of uneasiness in him. "Is the horse that Meredith didn't kill still out there?"

"Ed took it down to his place. The stage was pretty patched up anyhow, so I don't reckon there's enough left worth saving. Hell of a note." Charley lapsed into bleak private reverie again.

Isabel was shaking a pair of pillows into fresh slips. "Don't worry, Dad. It's enough for me that you came out of it all right."

Johnny was watching her, conscious as he always was of her supple, slender body, round, rosy-cheeked face and large, intelligent eyes. Then somebody rapped on the front door, and Isabel went out, and when she came back Whit was with her. Johnny noticed the soberness on his brother's face.

"Just heard about it," Whit said to Charley. "Don't you worry. I'll put one of our rigs on your run tomorrow and keep it there until you're well."

Old Charley started to speak, then glanced away. Isabel looked worried, bit her lower lip with strong white teeth, then said: "I guess it's all we can do, Whit. Doc Kibbee said at Dad's age it might take two or three months for his leg to heal enough to let him go back to work. There'd be a new hack to buy, and a new horse—but what's the use? I couldn't get away to drive the run with him helpless in bed, anyhow."

Charley still did not speak, but Johnny saw the pain cloud his eyes.

Whit said: "Ed Meredith told me he brought in the mail, and I'll see it goes out in the morning on schedule. Don't you worry, Charley. You take it easy and get well."

Johnny left with Whit, and Isabel followed them to the front porch. "It's going to break Dad's heart. He hasn't missed a run that I can remember. But it's nice of you to take over, Whit. I appreciate it." Johnny's heart turned over at the half-sweet, half-pained smile she gave his brother, and he scowled to himself at this, for she was Whit's girl. They were out on the main sidewalk before Johnny spoke his piece.

"There was something rotten in that, Whit."

"How do you mean, kid?"

"Somebody spooked his horses on purpose. The mail contract comes up for renewal next month, and there's already a question if the Government'll let Charley have it, account of his age. And Timberlane Transit is starting to spread itself out into the feeders."

Whit's teeth came together with an audible click. "You mean you think Timberlane Transit might have had something to do with it?"

"I don't know what I think." This coolness that so often turned to friction had been between them for a long while. Whit Timberlane was the one and only boss of Fork City's biggest staging company, though Johnny was a full partner. Old Hank had left it that way when he died, and it had never entered Johnny's mind to complain about it. Gruffly he added, "Damned if I trust Gil Dryden."

"He's a good road master, and that's all I'm interested in."

It had started to rain, the big drops whipped on a rising wind, and the linesman in Johnny instantly associated this with the flood waters already standing in the valley. Roads were going to be tougher, schedules harder to keep than ever. Though four years younger than his brother, Johnny was taller, and built along wiry, slender lines where Whit's body had the lines of a wedge. They came to the full block that quartered the Timberlane yard and barn and turned into the office.

Gil Dryden was seated in a circular chair near the big stove, reading a paper. He looked up, nodding, but the greeting was mostly for Whit. Johnny saw something in Whit's eyes that was a silent rebuke, and an answering expression of defiance came into Dryden's face.

"I heard old Charley Frazer busted his leg." Whit said, not mentioning that he had already been over to see the man.

Dryden grunted. "Yeah, so I heard. A man'd think the old coot'd have sense enough to jump and save himself."

"Nobody who knows Charley'd think that," Johnny cut in.

DRYDEN'S hard, flat glance was almost a slap. Whit turned on into his office. After a moment Dryden folded his paper and stuffed it into his coat pocket and went out without a word. Johnny took a chair and rolled a cigarette. Something lay between Whit and Dryden. Whit had just now tacitly reprimanded the road master, and Dryden had been uneasy about it. Johnny drew on his cigarette,

admitting that he was a little jealous of the man, who came into Whit's confidence more than his younger partner. Johnny wondered if old Hank had wanted it just this way when he arranged things.

Hank Timberlane had established the staging company when Johnny was learning to walk. It was now a major link in a big coastwise stage line, picking up thirty miles north of Fork City, where it based, and running a somewhat greater distance southward. There were a few laterals now, reaching out to newly settled communities. It kept a dozen Concords on the road all the time and employed half a hundred people. It enjoyed a good business, and under Whit's management it had grown much faster than under Hank's.

Though it had been three years before, Johnny still vividly recalled the day their father had called himself and Whit into his bedroom, only a few hours before he died, and addressed himself mostly to Johnny.

"Being a lot older," he'd said, "Whit got a head start on you, Johnny. He come up the hard way, the same as I wanted you to. You'll go ahead along the same lines. When you're twenty-five you'll take over your share of the management. Until then, it's all Whit's. I want you to forget you own any part of the company. You're a hired man, just like the other help. Then, when Whit takes you in on equal terms, you'll know your business as well as Whit and me know it."

Johnny had never questioned that, and he was still six months short of twenty-five. Officially he was only a whip for the line, though proud of the fact that he was conceded to be its best. He had been completely loyal to Whit, as he still was, and he realized Whit's management had been good. In fact, it had been a mite too progressive, Johnny thought.

Climbing to his feet, Johnny moved on into Whit's office. He said: "You're putting a stage on the Barnes Creek run to take care of Charley Frazer's mail contract. I'm making a bet that it'll never be turned back over to him. We'll get the mail contract, and Charley'll be out for good, and he's your girl's father."

Whit looked up from his desk and scowled. "I haven't looked that far ahead yet."

Johnny refused to be cowed. "You've got to work it smooth, don't you? For a year we've been moving into the feeders. But we can't just force your girl's father out, like we did the others. We've got to work it in a sickenin', two-faced way."

"What do you mean? It's not my fault Charley Frazer got hurt."

"I've got a feeling Gil Dryden knows something about how that happened."

Whit laid down his pen and smiled sourly. "You're jealous of him. On the road, he's your boss. And wherever you are, I am. It'll be that way for another six months, and don't you forget it."

"I'm not forgetting it. But I want a flat answer. Are you fixing to bid against Charley for the mail contract?"

"All right, suppose I am?"

"How're you going to square it with Isabel?"

"Charley's too old to be pounding out his brains on a hack seat. I've been trying to talk him into retiring. I've about got Isabel persuaded he'd ought to. He could only keep it up for a few years, anyhow, and now he'd have to buy new equipment. I reckon they'll both see the sensible thing is for him to quit and take it easy. I don't know how he's fixed, but if he needs money I can give him an easy job around the yard."

Johnny looked at him for a moment. "Charley's whole life's built around the fact that he carries the star route to Barnes Creek. It gives him a place in the world. He just ain't a man who can set and whittle. What you're fixing to do will kill him."

"The hell it will!" Anger began to glint in Whit's eyes. "Anyhow, what right have you got to bellyache? Wait six months, and you'll have a say. Right now you're doing what you're told. Or are you getting so smart you question Dad's judgment?"

Fury rose overwhelmingly in Johnny at that. "Never! But I'm questioning if he'd approve Timberlane Transit's moving by force into the feeder lines. Hank Timberlane never rode over another man in his life. We forced Jake Epperly off the Cloverdale run. Rainey Jerome—Abe Herrick—Guy Hadrian. We run them all out of business. And now we're going after Charley Frazer's run to Barnes Creek, which he started right after Hank opened between Broken Knee and Huller's Grove."

Reckless rage compelled him to have out his say. "I don't know whether Gil Dryden's working for you or pushing you, but I do know he's been behind some things that Hank Timberlane must've smelled in his grave. And if you don't know what I mean, you're too damned blind to run this busines!"

Whit Timberlane came to his feet and walked toward Johnny. Then he halted, letting the tension run out of him slowly. But when he spoke his voice was dangerously cold. "Under Hank's terms, I'm not letting you get away with that, Johnny. So you're griping about me helping Charley Frazer out by putting a stage on his run for him till he gets well! All right, kid—you're going to drive the run. Those are orders."

Johnny stared at him. "You can't mean it."

"You'll take the stage out in the morning." Grinning in cold triumph, Whit turned his back and returned to his desk.

Johnny wheeled out of the room, rage blinding him. Whit had meant that for the deliberate insult it was. Crack whip on the through stages, now he was assigned to a dinky side run for disciplinary purposes! Rebellion rose in him, but as he turned out onto the windswept street he knew that his unspoken promise to his father was greater than his own pride.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Hell—And High Water!

ANCE MONROE rode up on a muddy horse as Johnny reached the main gate. Second in standing only to Johnny among Timberlane whips, he cronied with Gil Dryden and this had been his day off. Eyeing his splattered rain clothes, Johnny asked, "Where have you been?"

Monroe grinned in the dim light from the office windows. "Out to see my folks. Road's wet and muddy as the devil. Why?" He was a runty, wizened-faced individual whose eyes were bright and calculating.

Johnny did not answer but went on down the street. Monroe's trashy parents lived on Barnes Creek. So he had been in that vicinity when somebody frightened Charley Frazer's spirited team into a runaway. Even though Johnny did not want to tie it together, it was making a pattern involving Timberlane Transit in a sickening way. He was on his way home for supper, but knowing he had to see Charley again at once he turned up the street leading under the ancient elms. As he moved in long, almost indolent strides he tried to find a way to exonerate Whit.

Dryden, the road master, was second in command to Whit, handling the outside work, assigning drivers and teams, trouble-shooting all over the line, keeping the tough schedules running on time. Whit had hired him since Hank's passing as part of his toughening up, spreading out program. Dryden did his job, and Whit insisted that this was all that mattered, while Johnny had inherited from old Hank a feeling that there were values in any enterprise beyond cold calculations of profit and loss.

In the past year Timberlane Transit had taken over several feeder lines, simply by starting and running stages at a loss until the small independent operators thereon were forced to get out from lack of income. This had aroused criticism in some quarters, but mostly the country was indifferent and it was true that the big company with its better and heavier equipment and greater know-how could provide superior service. There had been talk of rough tactics, now and then, for which Johnny had privately charged Gil Dryden and a handful of his intimates in the organization. Though not liking it, Johnny had held to his place until now. Now it had reached a point where he had to take a hand regardless of the restrictions placed upon him by a man now gone.

Isabel was in the kitchen preparing supper, and Johnny went at once to Charley's bedroom. Bluntly he asked, "Could the man who scared your horses have been Ance Monroe?"

Charley obviously did not want to commit himself, but at last he said: "Not only could've. It was. I got a pretty good look at the little cuss."

The validity of his own suspicions put a sickness in Johnny. "Charley, you've got to believe that Gil Dryden's running a game even Whit isn't onto. Timberlane Transit doesn't back a play like that."

"Once it wouldn't." It was evident that Charley did not believe him.

On his way out, Isabel's voice called him from the kitchen and Johnny turned back in that direction. The girl closed the door and faced him, her voice low and intent.

"Johnny, it would hurt Dad terribly to have to turn the star route over to Timberlane, even for a couple of months. He thinks he'll never get it back."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. Whit's expanding. He's told me about it, and I've argued with him to no avail. I just can't believe that he'd turn a situation like this to his own advantage."

"Are you going to marry him, Isabel?"

"I don't know that either. I admire him—I'm terribly fond of him—but I haven't made up my mind." She smiled at him strangely. "Johnny, I know what the arrangement is down there, but sometimes I think you let Whit run over you more than you have to. Whit likes to be the hole works. If you don't show fight sometimes, he'll never take you into the full partnership you're legally entitled to. If you're not careful, it's more apt to be Gil Dryden."

She was needling him, but Johnny wasn't certain it wasn't because she had her own axe to grind. Her beauty put a choking sensation in his throat. He managed a light grin. "I think Gil's looking in just that direction. He's got a nice set-up. Free hand from Whit, and not too many questions asked. Isabel, could you get the Widow Pettigrew to come and stay with Charley?"

"Why, probably."

"See her about it in the morning. And I'll see you again tomorrow night." He refused to explain further, went out and headed for home, the big square Timberlane house that old Hank had built on the hill above town and where old Nellie Gaskell still kept house for Johnny and Whit.

Johnny pulled out on the star route to Barnes Creek before daylight the next morning, driving one of the company mud wagons and a two-horse team. The run was called a star route because it carried mail from the Fork City post office to three small offices along the line, and there was a section where it made deliveries direct to settlers' mailboxes. It was a monotonous, ignominious run for a linesman accustomed to spinning Concord wheels and four to six racing horses. There were a few stage passengers, and it was the government mail contract that made it profitable to Charley Frazer.

THE flats west of town stood under bed-deep water much of the winter, and the recent heavy rains had built angry, muddy currents. Johnny crossed the first four-mile stretch of high water before he reached the Chepner post office, where he waited fifteen minutes while the mail was sorted; then he pressed on, for the fifteen-mile trip to Barnes Creek village was made both ways in a single day.

In spite of this, he took time to stop at the place where Charley Frazer's battered old Concord had run off the grade. It was a hopeless wreck, three wheels bashed in, the running gear twisted, the body caved and splintered. The dead horse still lay there, a splintered shaft of bone sticking through the bloody flesh of one shoulder, blood caked on its nostrils from the mercy shot Ed Meredith had put in its suffering brain. There was no salvage.

Yet when he reached Fork City again at seven that evening, Johnny's mind was made up. He left the mail pouches at the post office and turned the mud wagon and tired team over to a hostler at the Timberlane stables. Then he went home to clean up, relieved at not finding Whit there, ate his supper, and went over to the Frazers'.

"Did you arrange for Mrs. Pettigrew?" he asked Isabel.

"Yes. She'll be over in the morning."

"Good!" Johnny grinned, less from humor than from savage satisfaction. "Timberlane offered you the loan of a rig and driver to meet the emergency. The driver's quitting. It'll be up to you to take the rig out in the morning."

The girl regarded him thoughtfully and with new appreciation. "Johnny, I always had the feeling you were easy-going only because others had tied your hands for you. If the Frazers are still carrying the star route when the contract comes up for renewal, the only consideration will be the bids. Thanks, Johnny."

"Charley made his bid yet?"

Isabel nodded. "As he has every four years for the past twenty." She reached up quickly and kissed him full on the lips. "I like you better for this, Johnny, though I know it's going to get you into trouble."

The kiss touched fire to Johnny's blood, but he did not lift the arms that ached to hold her. "You've got to believe Whit's just blind, Isabel. So smart, mebbe, that he's stupid."

"Oh, I do." She smiled, with woman's mystery in it, and Johnny gulped and turned and left.

Gil Dryden and Whit were in the office when Johnny came in. Though he moved in the old slack-limbed way, there was tightness in the younger Timberlane. He repeated what he had told Isabel Frazer.

"I'm quitting, but since you already loaned them a mud wagon, Isabel's going to run it—starting in the morning."

Whit stared, and temper flared in Dryden's eyes. The lesser of Johnny's two satisfactions was the fact that he was also neatly getting out of the insulting punishment Whit had inflicted on him by taking him off the main line.

"You can't quit!" Whit exploded.

"Hank Timberlane had two dying wishes," Johnny drawled. "That I learn the business the hard way, and that I step into the company when I'm twenty-five. I've learned the business, and you've seen to it that it was the hard way. I won't be twenty-five for six months, but when I am I'll be ready to complete the agreement." He turned toward the door.

"Wait," Whit snapped. He studied Johnny for a seemingly endless time. "All right, Johnny. You go back on the main line in the morning. But damn you, you've ruined the play. It'll be impossible for me not to agree to the deal you made with Isabel."

"Don't I know it?" Johnny said, and went out.

Worry remained in him. Relying on his contention that it would be best for Charley Frazer to retire, Whit might still decide to risk Isabel's anger by bidding impossibly low on the mail contract. It was not profit that Whit wanted so much as to build a tight, complete stage monopoly in the country, which he would head. Power had blinded him and, with Dryden egging him on, Johnny was afraid of what might come of it yet.

He returned to the important Broken Knee run the next morning, taking little satisfaction in having beaten Whit at his own game. He returned to Fork City in mid-afternoon the next day, and he had barely rolled into the Timberlane yard when old George Kern came hobbling out of the barn.

"Johnny, I been stewing all day, and I figured Whit wasn't the man to tell about it. This morning Gil Dryden put them ringy blacks on the wagon Miss Isabel took out!"

A prickling sensation ran up Johnny's back and he swung to ground in quick anger. The black team was a pair of broncs that worked well enough as leaders or swingers, when steadied by other horses. They made an explosive pair, otherwise, and though Isabel was a good horsewoman she might be unequal to them in flooded or mountain country.

"I argued with the cuss," Kern resumed. "He told me it was his job to assign the horses and drivers and mine to keep my mouth shut. I threatened to see Whit about it, and he just laughed and told me to go ahead. So I figured I'd better wait for you, but damn it, I been worried."

"Put a hull on my saddler," Johnny said. Rage was boiling in him. Whit must have known about it or Dryden would not have invited old Kern to take the matter to him so readily. Kern had been wise in waiting, for otherwise they might have made it impossible for him to tell Johnny. Deciding he would see Whit about it later, Johnny swung aboard the moment old George brought his roan gelding and went pounding out of the yard.

Fifteen minutes later the horse splashed into the long section that was deeply under water and was slowed to a walk. A worried urgency was in Johnny but he had to bide his time. He came out of the overflow at long last and pressed on at a mile eating clip. A sigh of relief came from his lips when he saw Isabel's stage standing in front of the post office as he pounded into Chepner.

By the time he had drawn up, Isabel had come out of the post office and tossed a mail bag into the hack. She looked at him with interest and, he thought, some relief. "Why, Johnny!"

WITHOUT explaining, he swung down and tied his saddler to the tail gate of the hack. He helped her up, untied the team and swung up beside her. The blacks were tired now, and much of the frisk was gone out of them for the day. He debated whether to tell her that Timberlane Transit had furnished her with a killer team, when she decided the question for him.

"I sure had a time holding them in, Johnny."

He still did not want to tell her the complete truth. "Yeah. I'm going to raise hell and put props under it when I get back. Reckon there was a mix-up in the yard somewhere, this morning. I'll see it don't happen again."

She was quiet for a time, then she said: "And you rode out to see about me." She said it wonderingly, as though it gave her a deep satisfaction. Johnny did not take it up, though so much crowded his heart that he wanted to tell her. She was about a year younger than himself, but she had always been Whit's girl, and there was something distasteful in the thought that he might be able to take her away from Whit.

The mud wagon rolled along at a sharp clip until it reached the long flooded section. There the team settled to a patient walk, and Johnny noted that the water was nearly deep enough to seep into the hack bed. Dusk was heavy around them now, but he could judge the position of the road from the twin rail fence lines running on either side. A quiet satisfaction came to Johnny as he rode into the gathering evening with Isabel quietly beside him.

Johnny kept his eyes absently on the zigzag fences, held together by wire, and the covered bridge looming up before them. It was over Cornet Creek, and the dirt approaches made the only road that lifted above the water for a mile ahead. The blacks pulled up onto it presently like half-drowned animals gaining dry land.

The blast that rent the air ten seconds later was swelled by the roof over the bridge. In a split second Johnny recognized it as the explosion of a six-gun; then he was on his feet and sawing at the lines, for the loco blacks had lengthened into an abrupt, panicky run. Johnny's sawing on the reins had little effect, and they hit the water at the bottom of the approach with a splash that inundated them and the driver's seat. Johnny's slitted eyes vaguely registered the saddle horse that had been concealed at this near end of the bridge, and then the mud wagon went over and he was spilling across Isabel in a tremendous slosh of muddy water.

It rushed over him, and when he tried to gain his feet Johnny discovered he could not touch bottom. They had been pitched into one of the deep ditches that ran on either side of the inundated road. There was a quick, loud splashing as a horse and rider shot past, then Isabel's choked voice called:

"Johnny! I can't swim!"

He saw her head through the darkness, off to his right, her long hair plastered to it, her mouth open and gasping. Then she sank. He swam toward her with quick, powerful lunges, dived until he had grasped her clothing, then brought her to the surface. He could see the bridge to his left, and he swam strongly toward the road. A moment later she was seated on the bridge, head resting on knees, breathing in long, tortured gasps. Then she said: "I didn't swallow much of it, Johnny. I'm all right. What was it?"

There was no keeping the truth from her now, and he grated: "That was damned near murder! Whoever fired that gun didn't figure on me being along. If I hadn't been, you'd have been drowned, and it would have looked

like a rig behind a spooky team simply had overturned in high water."

It seemed totally preposterous that the game should have reached this point, but there it was. "Did you hear the rider cut out of here?" Johnny asked.

"No, I didn't. It was while I was under water, maybe. I heard the noise, and it sounded like a gun, all right, but are you sure, Johnny? Couldn't a bridge timber under a strain from the water make a noise like that?"

"Mebbe. But not that loud." He stroked his chin thoughtfully, knowing there were so many plausible, natural explanations for this thing that nobody would believe the truth. Johnny waded out to where the team stood, held by the overturned vehicle.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Break That Alibi!

IT WAS nearly nine o'clock by the time they got the mud wagon righted, prying with rails Johnny had to swim out and bring back from the fence, and reached Fork City. Johnny turned the soaked mail bags over to the postmaster, then took Isabel home. They had agreed not to broadcast how it happened, for even Isabel wasn't persuaded it had been as Johnny claimed.

"Whit's out of it!" she had said fiercely. "And even if it was Dryden, as you think, why should he want to drown me deliberately, or even risk it?"

For this Johnny had no answer, but as soon as he was assured that she was going to suffer no ill effects from the submersion and the long cold ride in wet clothing, he went home to change. Whit practically lived in the company office, but to Johnny's surprise he was in the parlor, reading before a log fire in the big fireplace.

Johnny stood in the archway, with water dripping from his clothes, and watched Whit's face with cold intentness as the latter looked up and frowned in surprise.

"What happened to you?" Whit asked.

Johnny sighed, almost believing, and wanting desperately to be convinced, that Whit's puzzlement was genuine. In cold, biting fury he said: "Gil Dryden put those outlaw blacks on Isabel's hack, this morning. Kern told me instead of you because, he said, anything Dryden does gets your okay. I picked Isabel up at Chepner, on her way back. Somebody fired a sixgun as we come through the Cornet Creek bridge. He was hidden in the overhead, I reckon, and dropped down and got away before I'd pulled Isabel out of the water. The blacks spooked and hit that water like it was a brick wall. The hack overturned, and Isabel would've drowned if I hadn't been along!"

"No!" Whit rose to his feet, his cheeks drained, obviously shaken.

"You don't know anything about it?" Johnny's voice held an edge of tightly suppressed anger.

"No!" Whit broke gaze, and turned to stare at the fire.

"And you didn't know that Ance Monroe spooked Charley's horses and caused that runaway?"

"No!" Whit whirled back, and the muscles on his square jaw bulged. "I don't believe there was any gun fired to spook the blacks! You hate Gil Dryden, and you'd do anything in your power to get me to fire him! And before you gum up the works any farther, let me tell you something I've hated to have to tell you! Unless Timberlane gets its monopoly, and starts making some real money, it's ruined!"

Johnny stared at him. "What do you mean?"

Whit let out a pent-up breath. "I reckon we've got to have a talk, kid Go change to dry clothes and I'll tell you."

Johnny changed and ate his supper, surprise and bewilderment in him. When he returned to the parlor, Whit had grown calmer. Whit grunted, "Sit down and build a smoke. This'll take a while."

Johnny moved to a chair. "So you've had a reason for being high-handed about me seeing the books!"

"I have." Whit stood before the fire, staring into it. "Operating at a loss to take the feeders has hurt us worse than I figured on, but once it was started I had to go on with it, for prestige reasons if nothing more. I'm in deep at the bank, and they're pressing me. I've got to have a monopoly, because when I get it I can name my own tariffs. I can branch out, and begin to make money besides. Without it, there's a crack in the set-up, a place for somebody to drive in a wedge to upset me."

Anger clouded Johnny's voice. "And because of that, Charley Frazer's life is risked. And a deliberate attempt is made on Isabel's. I don't get it."

There was a pained look in Whit's eyes. "You're sticking to that, are you?"

"It's the truth! Is there some tie-up with Dryden that I don't understand?"

"No. He knows I want the Barnes Creek run. I've let him be a little rough in other cases, and I knew he was going to try to do little things to discourage Charley into accepting retirement. Privately, I gave him hell about that runaway. He says he figured that Charley would have sense enough to jump for it, and his rig would be wrecked and maybe his horses hurt. I admit he was damned careless, but he never figured on Charley getting

hurt. As for an attempt on Isabel's life—well, that story's preposterous, and I'd advise you to change your tack."

"Does Dryden know the squeeze Timberlane Transit's in?"

"He does. And I expect that's why he took to playing too rough."

"I'm telling you this, Whit—he'd better not play rough again."

"I've already warned him of that. He's loyal to me, and that's how I know you're lying. He knows how I feel about Isabel, even if I do want the Barnes Creek line vacated. Does it make sense that he would pull a stunt like you claim?"

Johnny shook his head. "You poor, blind, power-drunk fool!" He got his coat and went out, completely dissatisfied with Whit's explanation.

Dryden was crossing the yard with Ance Monroe when Johnny walked through the gate. Johnny called, "Gil!" and went forward swiftly. Dryden halted, wheeling around, and Anse Monroe followed suit like a dog coming to heel. The yard was deserted save for these three, the big inner square wheel-rutted and muddy, light from the lanterns hanging on either side of the gate fading out in a wash of pale moonlight where Dryden and Monroe waited.

A reckless hunger for satisfaction was in Johnny Timberlane as he came up. Coldly he said, "You've got a beating coming for a lot of things, Dryden, but this is for today's work," and surged forward.

DRYDEN flexed a knee, fists coming up, and leaped ahead. Johnny's fist neatly clipped his chin, sending his head back with a snap. Monroe moved aside, expressionless save for gleaming eyes. Dryden moved back warily, settled his feet again and blocked Johnny's next rush with short, heavy punches with both fists. Johnny had conceded the man ten pounds in weight and also, he now realized, a longer reach. Disdaining this, he drove in again.

He rushed Dryden backward half a dozen steps, concentrating on the man's head with his chopping, lash-quick fists. Dryden covered, backed blindly against the board walk fringing the buildings and went down. Johnny sailed through the air and hit him flatly, one clear and irresistible urge in him. He kept hammering Dryden's head, then the man twisted from under him, partly brought up a knee in a quick, hard smash to Johnny's belly. Nausea ran through Johnny as he rolled away. Dryden scrambled to his knees, hurtled forward like a springing wildcat.

Johnny felt the crushing impact and weight, realized Dryden was driving at his eyes with a stiffened thumb. He locked fingers behind the man's head and, pulling hard, smashed Dryden's sweating face against the walk. He rolled from under and scrambled to his feet. He let Dryden rise, then tore into him with looping rights and lefts, haymaking punches that the other could not block. He drove Dryden back against the stable wall, pinned him there and put his full weight behind the right fist that exploded off the man's chin. He could feel slackness come under his other hand then, and, drawing back, he let Dryden drop in dead weight.

He had gathered something of an audience, he discovered as he turned away. Old George Kern had come out of the barn and was silently watching. Ance Monroe looked on intently that his slight body had assumed the bend of a drawn bow, and some one else had come in from the street. Johnny disregarded them and stalked away, the violence boiling in him only a little relieved.

He came down early the next morning though his schedule would not pull out for Broken Knee until ten o'clock. He reached the office to find Gil Dryden and Monroe and Cal Nemers, the company veterinary, who was in their clique, already waiting there. He cast a brief glance at Dryden's battered face and slitted eyes, then passed on into Whit's office.

Whit reached there shortly, pausing in the outer office only long enough to regard Dryden with surprised eyes, then coming on in. Johnny had canted a chair against a wall and was scanning yesterday's paper. Dryden brought his two cronies in on Whit's heels. He looked at Johnny appraisingly, then switched attention to Whit.

"I reckon the time's come for a showdown, Whit," he said.

"Johnny did that, did he?"

Dryden scowled. "The whipping ain't the point. He made accusations, and I'm here to set the record straight. I can prove I wasn't within miles of the Cornet Creek bridge yesterday."

"How do you know about that?" Johnny's cool voice cut in.

Dryden spun toward him. "When I asked George Kern last night what the devil had touched you off, he told me you had trouble there. When you said you were paying me for the day's work, naturally I knew you was holding me responsible. So I come to prove to Whit you're either a damned liar or crazy."

Johnny nodded. When he had checked in the evening before he had explained the mud wagon's muddy, soaked appearance only by revealing that the blacks had spooked and upset them. He grunted, "Go ahead."

Dryden turned back to Whit. "You can see by the log that Ance brought in the evening schedule from Huller's Grove yesterday, and

George Kern saw I was with him and so was Cal, here. I'd taken Cal over to Geneva station to look at a horse there that's down with colic. We rode over with Rocky Lamb and come back with Ance. Rocky'll tell you that, and you can check on it at Geneva. So how in hell could any of us've been anywhere else?"

Johnny studied the three, Dryden assured and defiant, Ance Monroe intent and glittering-eyed. Cal Nemers, the tubby veterinary, was an inveterate toady.

Whit turned toward Johnny. "That satisfy you?"

"Not by a whale of a lot."

DRYDEN grinned without warmth. "I figured it wouldn't pipe him down, even though it makes him out a liar. That's why I'm calling for a showdown Whit. It's me or him."

Surprise leaped into Whit's eyes. "After all, Johnny's legally a partner."

"I'm ready to buy him out. It's your say who's the most valuable to the company."

"You mean that?"

"I do. I'll pay him cash on the barrelhead. It's that, or you can give the three of us our time."

Color had stained Whit's cheeks, and when he looked at Johnny there was anger in his eyes. "You kicked up this fuss. Want to take him up?"

"Not any." A sinking feeling had hit Johnny Whit was believing Dryden, perhaps because of the man's pat alibi, perhaps because he wanted to believe him.

Whit jerked an impatient head toward the door. "Go on back to work, Gil. I want to talk to Johnny"

Dryden went out, not troubling to conceal a faint grin of triumph. Whit went over and closed the door, returned to his desk and dropped thoughtfully into the chair After a reflective moment, he said: "You're coming off the line. You're going to take the lowest damned job in the barn."

Johnny's eyes were icy as he climbed to his feet. "Decided to force me into taking his offer, have you?"

"It could be." Whit refused to meet his eyes. "Go tell George Kern to give you a broom and a shovel."

Johnny crossed the yard with rebellion hot in him, yet he held on grimly to his self-control. Dryden's offer to buy him out had not astonished him, and, though he did not yet see it clearly, this had always been an important part in the play. Whit would like it better so. He worked well with Dryden; anything but well with his brother. Johnny had never tried to estimate the worth of his interest in Timberlane Transit, which must have devaluated considerably if Whit had been running the company badly into the red; yet even so it surprised him that Gil Dryden would have the hard cash to back such an offer. Unless Dryden had had it from the start and had been playing all along to break into the company. And having crowded Johnny out, he might immediately start the same process with Whit.

Whit would deserve it, too, but there were other considerations. Johnny had an idea that he might be able to crack that neat alibi of Dryden's. George Kern exploded all over the stable when Johnny looked him up and told him he was the new barn boy.

"Keep your shirt on, George," Johnny told him. "The main reason I'm taking it is because Whit felt pretty damned certain I wouldn't." And when he saw Gil Dryden at a distance, later, the look on the man's face told Johnny that Dryden felt he wouldn't keep it for long.

Kern told Johnny that Dryden, Monroe and Nemers had come in on the evening schedule from Huller's Grove the night before, as Dryden had claimed, which apparently ruled the three out of the Cornet Creek incident. Johnny doubted that there was anyone else in the organization or out of it intimate enough with Dryden to have been taken in on it.

Kern had one thing of particular interest to report. The Huller's Grove evening stage was due at the Main Street station at 5:45 and at the Timberlane barns at six o'clock. The night before it had not reached the barn until 6:30. When he got off work, Johnny checked at the station and found it had been equally late reaching there. With excitement kindling in him, he headed for the office and, though Gil Dryden was there talking with Whit, he took down the clip of road reports and began to leaf through them.

Dryden came out of Whit's office, scowling at him. "What're you doing in here?"

"Taking a look-see."

"You're the stable boy now, mister. Drift."

Johnny ignored him, and after a moment Dryden turned away, his eyes glittering with anger.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Whip Hand!

JOHNNY left the office in a few minutes on his own volition, his long lean body generating a reckless energy that turned into an impulse to action. Yet he confined himself to reflection for a long while. Ance Monroe's trip ticket reported the delay as resulting from unexplained wheel trouble at Irish Bend. Whether it was real or faked, this delay gave

Johnny the key to the mystery puzzling him.

The Huller's Grove road ran southwest out of Fork City, across a long flat to Irish Bend, a village five miles distant and just out of the Barnes Creek foothills. Thence it cut southeast to Huller's Grove, nearly thirty miles away. Checking back in his mind, Johnny remembered that Isabel Frazer had been on time when he picked her up in Chepner, the evening before, so she must have reached Cornet Bridge about 5:45. The inbound Huller's Grove stage, with Ance Monroe at the reins, would have reached Irish Bend on the other route at 5:20, and from his report Monroe must also have been on time.

The thing that excited Johnny was the fact that it was only about two and a half miles between Irish Bend and Cornet Bridge across country. With the half hour delay, anyone of the trio that had taken refuge in the claim that they were on that stage could have cut out of the Bend on horseback as soon as they reached there and pounded across to the bridge. The doubtlessly deliberate delay in Irish Bend would give him about a half hour's leeway at the bridge. Then with his work accomplished, he could again cut across open fields, picking up the stage again just outside Fork City, and riding into town with it in all innocence, probably leaving his saddle horse in the brush to be picked up later.

Johnny reminded himself coolly that this only proved that one of the trio *could* have done it, yet if he could locate a passenger who had been on the stage that person might remember if anybody had been picked up on the road. If he could accomplish this, Johnny told himself, he would have Gil Dryden in a position even Whit couldn't wink at. The clerk at the stage station could tell him if any local residents had come in on that stage, but the station had been closed for the night by the time Johnny reached this point. Johnny resolved to see the clerk the first thing in the morning, and went home to clean away the heavy traces of the barns and eat his supper.

Whit did not come home and, restlessness in him, Johnny strolled over to the Frazers' after supper. Isabel reported that she had been furnished with a gentle team and had made the run to Barnes Creek that day without trouble. The first shock and pain of his broken leg had worn off, and old Charley was propped up in bed and looking more cheerful. "I'll be back on the job afore long," he kept promising Johnny.

A new sense of freedom was in Johnny. For his own part he had fulfilled Hank Timberlane's dying wishes, and beyond that he had no further obligation. When he left, Isabel followed him out through the house, and before he opened the front door he said: "I wish I could feel your needling me in this wasn't all because of your dad. I wish I—"

She looked at him in quick resentment. "Why, Johnny!"

The gravity of his eyes showed the personal urgency in him. "It's been hard reaching the place where I feel I've got the right to court you, Isabel. I was hoping you wanted that to come as much as I did."

She softened instantly, and when she lifted her eyes they were shining. "Oh, I did, Johnny! Hank Timberlane put a dying obligation on you always to defer to Whit, though I'm sure he didn't realize the advantage Whit would take of it. Johnny, even your face has changed since you've thrown off your bondage to him. That's what I wanted, though it would be untruthful to claim I didn't want to help Dad, too."

"As I did. When this thing's over, I'll have something to say to you, Isabel."

"Oh, Johnny, say it now!"

She came into his long, sinewy arms and Johnny Timberlane knew then she had always belonged there. Calmness and clarity and a quiet happiness came to him. He kissed her tenderly and for a long moment felt her slightness against him. Then he said:

"Whit hasn't told me everything. He's not as crooked or as blind as he looks. Gil Dryden's got him in a whip lash. Whit was fool enough to want to build himself a stage monopoly, and Dryden egged him on. Timberlane Transit didn't have the reserves to stand the cut-rate tactics he used, and he got into hot water. He reached the point where he had to go ahead to pull out. He even reached the point where he had to play dirty with you, easing his conscience with the argument that he was doing Charley a favor by forcing him to retire. He even planned to jack up tariffs, once he'd made his hold secure. That much is against him."

Isabel nodded. "I know. Whit sees life as a card game. A man plays his hand according to its strength. So long as he doesn't cheat, he's entitled to his winnings."

"That's it. And it gave Gil Dryden a pretty set-up. Dryden's main job has been to force a break between me and Whit before I step into a half say in the company. He probably not only expected Charley to get hurt, but hoped he would be killed. He tried the same thing on you. And if you had been killed, Whit's partial innocence wouldn't have saved us from a total and permanent bust-up. That's why I swallowed my pride when Whit ordered me into the stables. If I'd blown my top and accepted Dryden's offer to buy my interest, it would have been exactly what he's been playing for."

"I wonder where Dryden got the money?"

"He's proved he's crooked as a dog's hind laig. That kind of man always has ways."

Isabel looked worried. "And playing for high stakes, he's already tried murder. Johnny, I'm afraid there's trouble ahead for you yet!"

"If he doesn't bring it my way, I'm taking it his."

WHEN Johnny walked out into the street the last doubt was gone from him. Tomorrow he would smash Dryden's alibi and prove to Whit that the man had made an attempt on Isabel's life. That would be enough for Whit. If Timberlane Transit went under as the result of its unethical tactics of the past year or so, it had it coming. Hank Timberlane would be the first to admit that.

Johnny was half down the deserted street, so thickly studded with the huge, leafless elms, when the hack wheeled around the corner ahead. It had a top and the storm curtains were down and it pulled over to his side of the street. A man swung down, and Johnny recognized the runty Ance Monroe; at the same instant he saw the gun in the man's hand.

"No racket, Johnny, and hop in!" Monroe rasped.

Indecision held Johnny for an instant. He realized that Monroe was doubtless prepared to shoot him down in his tracks if he resisted, relying on anonymity for his own protection. Yet to submit might be to move against yet greater odds. He was unarmed, save for a pair of fists that itched suddenly for action.

"Move, or you get it here!" Monroe snapped.

On the slight chance that he might draw cards somewhere in the playout, Johnny turned and climbed under the storm curtains. Monroe swung up after him and the hack lurched away. Johnny settled into the back seat, Monroe following and shoving the gun barrel against Johnny's ribs. Even from behind and in the poor light Johnny recognized the driver as fat Cal Nemers, the veterinary.

When the shrouded vehicle rattled across the bridge over Kimball's Slough, Johnny realized that they were going to the house where Dryden and Monroe batched, just beyond the limits of town. The hack pulled around behind, into a screen furnished by several outbuildings, and Monroe grunted: "Climb out, Johnny, and no funny stuff." Nemers tied the team and followed, instead of putting it up in the barn, and Johnny guessed they had further use of it this night. They crossed the back porch and came into the kitchen.

All the blinds were down, and Gil Dryden waited there, grinning wickedly. "Johnny, you're a hard nut to crack. If you hadn't taken it into your stubborn head to check that trip ticket tonight, this wouldn't be necessary. But I seen then that you knew how to crack our alibi."

"You admit it was that, do you?"

"Why not? You ain't going to tell nobody. I was the one fired that gun at the Cornet Creek bridge. At the picnic last summer I found out Isabel Frazer can't swim. I wanted her to drown, because I knew it would blow you and Whit farther apart than the poles. Ance held the stage in Irish Bend to give me time, and I high-tailed across country and then fogged it back, and he picked me up again at the Boone place. I never figured anybody'd see that angle, but since you did you could have proved it by Ben Nanson, who was on the stage and seen Ance pick me up. So we've got to shoot the works, Johnny."

"Since you're telling me this, it means you're going to kill me," Johnny returned, his voice ice-cold. "How do you figure on getting that one past Whit?"

"Easy as the others." Dryden pulled a cigar from his pocket, bit off the end and reached into his pocket for a match, all with easy, relaxed movements. "Them loco blacks. You're the stable boy now. In the morning you'll be down there ahead of anybody else. Somebody's going to find you with your skull kicked in. They're all going to figure you come up behind one of them sons of satan contrary to his liking. Natural as hell, and as long as there's an acceptable explanation for it, Johnny, I don't figure your loving brother's going to care a whale of a lot."

"I figure you're dead wrong about that!" Johnny grated.

"And you're right, Johnny!"

THEY all whirled. The kitchen door had come an inch or so ajar in utter quietness, then had swung wide violently. Whit Timberlane stood there, and he held a gun in his hand. Eyes glittering like blue ice he came into the room. "The first man that moves," Whit warned, "is going to drop in his tracks!"

Ance Monroe still held a gun on Johnny. Dryden faced him on the opposite side of the room, and the fat Nemers had taken the weight off his heavy arches by dropping into a chair. Dryden and Nemers were both gun hung, and as they faced Whit there was speculation and uncertainty in their eyes. It

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was a development they had been given every reason not to expect.

Whit's command of the situation was only partial. If he fired, Ance Monroe would drop Johnny in the same split second. Whit would still have two deadly guns to face. In this deadlock, Whit prowled forward a couple of paces.

"I've been watching your every move tonight, Dryden!" Whit snapped. "I saw your hack leave and come back with Johnny. I sneaked up onto the porch, and I heard your brags about trying to kill Isabel and your plans to beef Johnny. What'll surprise you is the fact that I half believed Johnny when he first told me about Isabel. When I saw how jumpy his inspecting that trip ticket made you, I took a look at myself and figured it out. But I played it your way to give you a chance to hang yourself, sticking around handy with a gun to offset the risk to Johnny."

Dryden let out a breath in a combined sigh and oath. "All right, mister, but I'm still the only one who can save you! Without the money I can put up, Timberlane Transit's bankrupt, and you know it."

Whit nodded. "I realize that. I figure Johnny'd rather have it that way. I've found out I would. I made a swell-headed play for power, and I've learned my lesson. You three can drop your guns or make your play. The Timberlanes are ready."

A thrill shot through Johnny, and in spite of the odds against them there was a quiet satisfaction in the fact that Whit was at last siding him, all out. In the same moment he realized that Dryden and the pair that backed him were going to play it out. He waited no longer than this, hurtling aside. Monroe's gun roared, and Johnny felt a stinging, frigid kick in his shoulder. The explosion carried an echo scarcely disjoined from it, and Monroe slumped drop as Whit triggered.

Dryden scrambled sideways, clawing out his gun. The fat Nemers filled his hand in his chair, unable to afford the time and effort required to hoist himself onto his feet.

The impact of Monroe's bullet spun Johnny and he careened into the wall and slid down it to the floor. Whit had stood tensely at the end of the kitchen range, with it between him and Dryden. This gave Nemers a shot, and he tried it too fast. Whit drilled a hole in the man's pudgy, bald forehead.

Intent on Whit, Dryden edged toward the wall. Johnny had drawn his legs under him, and now he hurtled himself again, shoulders striking Dryden behind the knees and caving him in. Dryden fell hard across Johnny, then rolled onto his belly, snapping a quick shot at Whit, who was held impotent by Johnny's still being entangled with his target. Whit weaved on his feet, then slumped to the floor.

Kicking savagely at Johnny's head with his bootheels, Dryden sat up with an evil grin and haunched again. He started to lift his gun, with Johnny a sitting duck before him, but before he could trigger, Whit fired from the floor. For what seemed an interminable moment Dryden sat there, jaw sagging, sightless eyes inscrutable; then, as if in complete weariness, he rolled over onto his side and lay still.

Johnny scrambled to his feet and crossed to Whit, who was grinning and trying to rise. There was blood on his pants leg, but he got to his feet after an awkward effort. "They're dead, and I'm sick," Whit said through white lips. "Let's get out of here."

Johnny was feeling much the same, and he helped Whit into the back yard. He unhitched the hack Nemers had tied there and drove Whit across town to the Timberlane yard. Leaving Whit in the office, he fetched Doc Kibbee, and when the doctor had dressed both their wounds and left, the brothers looked at each other.

"I hope you believed what I told Dryden, Johnny," Whit said. "At first, when you made your charges, I simply couldn't believe it was as serious as you claimed, because I couldn't see any reason for Dryden's pulling off stunts like that. Then tonight, when he offered to buy you out, I saw it all. I played the fool, kid. I reckon you learned what Hank Timberlane wanted you to know better than I did. Being decent isn't only a matter of principle. A man's a lot more secure when he plays the game. So I figure it'll be all right with Dad, Johnny, if we jump the gun a few months and you come into the company now. You're a better man than I am, and maybe you can save it yet."

"Not a better man than you'll be after tonight," Johnny replied. "And the first step I'll want to make is to turn the feeders back over to the men we took them away from. Mebbe stopping that drain will let us pull out, Whit."

"I want to do that, too."

Johnny grinned in embarrassment. "And there's another thing. I took your girl from you, Whit. Isabel's going to marry me."

After a lengthening moment, Whit said: "I'd have that coming, even if you hadn't proved yourself ten times worthier of her. There's just one thing, though. I hope I haven't sacrificed the right to come to your wedding."

On that they shook hands, and then, being practical men, went immediately into plans for the first moves of the new Timberlane brothers' partnership.

THE END

# ★ UP THE TRAIL ★

DURING the last thirteen years, starting back there in September, 1933, and continuing through thick and thin up to the present day, your magazine of fighting Frontier fiction—*Star Western*—has tried, like all get out, to give its thousands of readers what they truly want in Old West fiction and Americana.

We have received many letters praising the quality of *Star Western* during those thirteen years. Men—and some women, too—from the state of Oregon on the shores of the Pacific to Texas and its Gulf ports, to the Carolinas and Maine on the Atlantic, have written the magazine's editors telling us what they've thought of its story content.

There have been complaints, of course. Complaints that *Star* wasn't big enough. Complaints that more stories were needed, and wanted. Old-time graybeards in Nevada, and cowboys in the Panhandle, and lumbermen in the tall timberlands of Washington State, have demanded yarns recreating dramatic instances in *their* respective rugged, rough-and-tumble, eye-for-an-eye lives.

The many authors writing for *Star*—and those boys are the very best in the string—have tried their damndest to please everybody during those thirteen long years of *Star's* life. Pleasing everybody, of course, has proved to be impossible, but this magazine is proud to say that its writers have come as close to the mark as is humanly possible.

Way back in November of 1933, when this nation renewed normal diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union—remember?—*Star Western* was selling at the price of fifteen cents per copy. In the year 1935, when a man named Adolph Hitler broke the Versailles Treaty by ordering military conscription for Germany—remember?—*Star Western* was going along its merry way. In 1937, when the Spanish Civil War was at its height—remember?—*Star* was getting to the peace-loving citizens of the United States the best possible in Western fiction.

Through those history-making years, when the fate of the entire world was being batted about like a shuttlecock, folks in all walks of American life—from bankers and lawyers to cowboys and cab drivers—were being thrilled by the living drama in the pages of *Star Western.* And still at fifteen cents per copy!

During the great war just concluded, the publishers of this magazine carried on, and it's a safe bet to say that thousands and thousands of our fighting men on the land and on the sea and in the air gained moments of relaxation—if only a few—from the dirty realities of battle, in the pages of *Star Western.*

Paper shortages hit us, and hard! But the popularity of *Star* didn't wane. Instead, it grew!

The war has ended, but not the search, by lovers of stories of the Old West, for more and more of their favorite fiction.

That's okay by us, of course. But mechanical and other difficulties forbid the publishers of *Star* to print it each week. We can't even print it twice a month. The paper shortage still continues. Yes, and other difficulties beset us. But *Star* has taken the bull by the horns and done, as has been its policy down through the years, the very best it knows how.

Starting with the September issue—next month's issue—*Star Western* will add thirty-two pages of fast-firing, hard-hitting, dramatic, colorful Frontier fiction. This means more than twenty thousand words additional from the typewriters of your favorite authors.

It has been the policy in the past to present, on the average each month, six big novels. In the future, this policy, of course, will be continued. But on top of that will be our answer to the requests for more stories—at least two action-jammed novels! More than twenty thousand additional words! Thirty-two additional pages. Of course, the price will have to be raised to twenty-five cents a copy, since both of the cost of material and wages have taken a jump. But at that, it's only ten cents more an issue for about twenty-thousand more words, which figures out roughly, to about a nickel a story. And we think you'll find that the best buy in Western fiction value in any magazine today!

But quality will not be sacrificed for quantity. If, in the judgment of *Star's* editors, a single novel has the punch, drama, characterization and real, live human interest that readers demand, then that single story will be used instead of two possibly inferior yarns.

The authors will still be among the best in the business of exciting Western tale-telling—old-timers and youngsters alike. Hombres like Walt Coburn, Tom W. Blackburn, Thomas Thompson, Dee Linford, Joseph Chadwick, Ray Nafziger and Ken Fowler will all be firing away again.

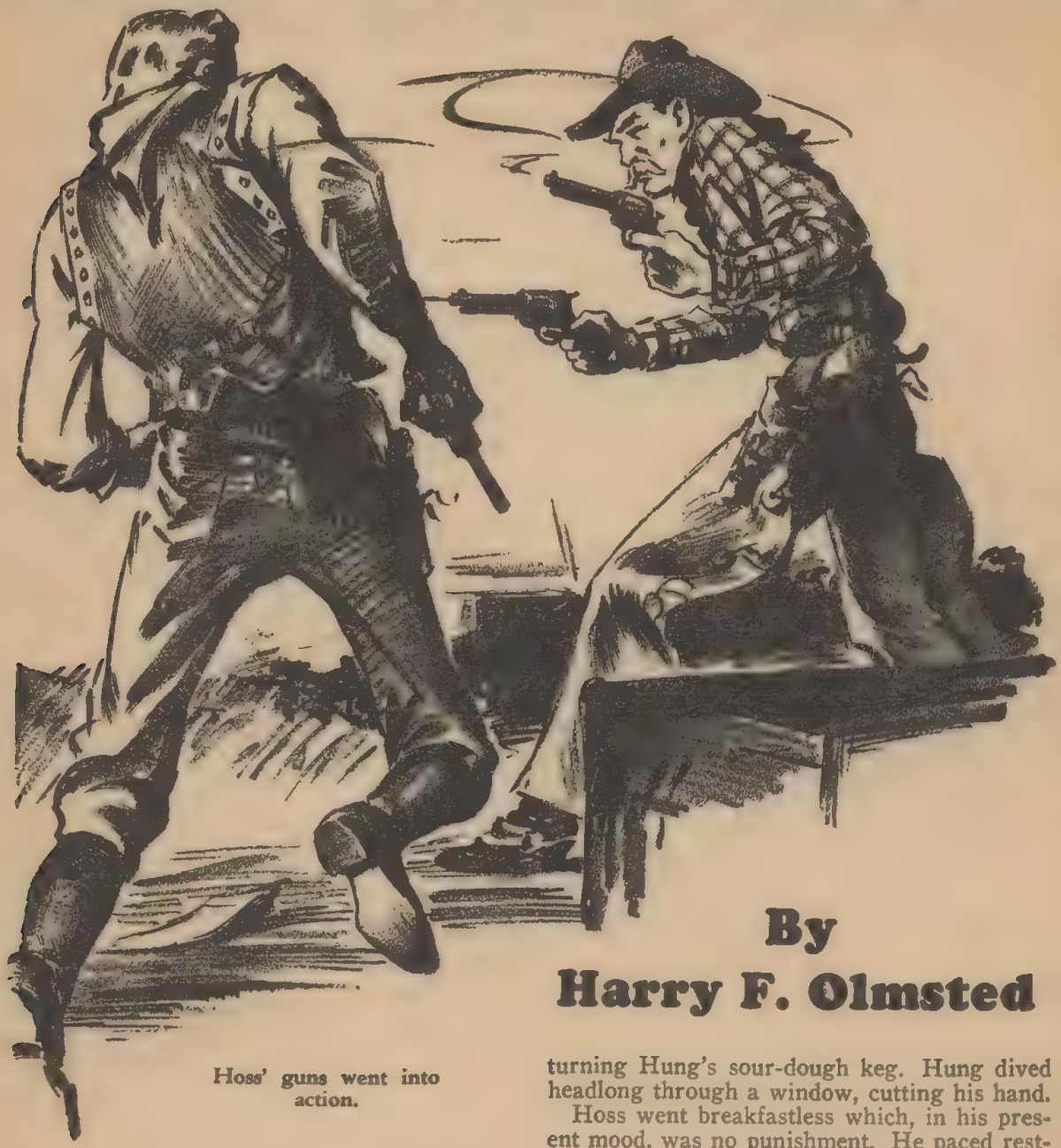
The new, big 130 page September issue of *Star Western* will go on sale August 9!

# HOSS GREER

## Powerful Novel of a Man-Killer Combine

With a $1000 blood-bounty on his grizzled head and a vast cattle empire riding the jackpot, could gun-trapped Hoss Greer play his last desperate hole card against that range-grabbing murder syndicate—by masquerading as the same deadly killer who was pledged to lift his scalp?

# BETS ON SIXES



Hoss' guns went into action.

## By Harry F. Olmsted

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Death on Pioneer Trail

THE day began badly at Tres Alamos. During the night, a bear invaded the meat house, and dragged off a beef. Hung Soon, up at dawn to prepare breakfast, discovered weevils in the flour. While the Oriental cursed these plagues in his best Cantonese invective, the rough string man put a plunging bronc through the kitchen wall, overturning Hung's sour-dough keg. Hung dived headlong through a window, cutting his hand.

Hoss went breakfastless which, in his present mood, was no punishment. He paced restlessly, a far-away look in his faded eyes, his mind on high Apache Peaks meadows and business of the VIA Pool—VIA meaning "Five," in Arizona.

During most of his career, Hoss had lone-wolfed it, proudly. Partners, like wives, were a doubtful risk. Success in the cow game meant hunting down risks like killer wolves, and making an end to them. VIA was Hoss' one flier in partnership, and there was a reason for this.

A terrible drouth had ravaged Central Arizona ranges. Those who thought to tough

it out and wait for a break lost their shirts. Only those with high mountain graze came through. Hoss had some high grass, but not enough. His losses were serious, and he boasted he intended to spend important money as insurance against it happening again.

This promise reached the ears of Bob Taggat, a Cibicue cowman. He came to Hoss with a plan. Up around Apache Peaks were a number of nesters who could be bought out. They owned valuable patented spots and controlled grazing leases. Taggat was forming a pool to buy out these small operators. Already he had lined up Benson Johns, who ran Rocking J cattle on Cave Creek; Stiles Sherring, whose Twin S in McDowell Valley dated way back, and Val Cartmell, whose V Cross C critters ranged the San Carlos. He needed one more man. Hoss could buy in for a hundred thousand.

"A hundred thousand?" Hoss protested. "You're crazy if you think I'll line your pockets with that kind of money."

"Not my pockets, Greer," Taggat had said, patiently. "Your money goes into the pool. Whatever profit there is will be shared by us all equally. I've already spent five thousand for options and a like amount for engineering surveys, plans and an application for permit to build a dam on Volcano Creek—already granted. The land—more than eighteen hundred acres, and leases—around eight thousand acres, will stand us two hundred thousand. The dam will cost that much or more. When it's done, we'll own high range and water for fifty thousand head. And we'll be independent of any conceivable drouth condition. What do you think of it?"

It was a tempting morsel for a man half ruined by drouth. Hoss knew Johns, Sherring and Cartmell—knew them well and favorably. Taggat he knew by reputation, and that none too well. The man had straight eyes though; he talked like a sincere man. And he presented the risks along with the benefits.

Hoss asked for time, and got it. Phoenix bankers verified Taggat's financial rating. Hoss' lawyers approved the project as good business. Johns, Sherring and Cartmell were enthusiastic. So Hoss went in with both eyes open, and VIA was organized. Options were exercised and the pool came into possession of eighteen hundred acres of high meadowland, plus valuable water rights. A Globe contractor built the earth-fill dam and the job had been finished now for eighteen months. Due to copious rains, none of the partners had used the high range last summer. According to Taggat, whose outfit was nearest to Volcano Creek, the dam had wintered fine; the reservoir was full and running over the spillways.

That was good news, for it had been a winter of high winds and no rain. It was May now and lowland feed was already beginning to fail. Hoss had made plans to drive cattle to the Peaks early in July. But a whisper had reached his ears, and he was worried.

An Indian puncher on Hoss' Rafter W had told his foreman how quick flash floods had come sailing down Black House Creek, washing out the *hoghans* of his people, and driving them to higher ground. When asked howcome, he had answered: "Water come from dam on mountain. Too much. No good."

So far as Hoss knew there was no other dam but VIA's. And how the hell could water get from a dam on Volcano Creek into the Black House drainage? Hoss wrote Taggat, whose answer scouted the idea of Black House water coming from any dam. There had been several thunder storms in the mountains. "The dam is full and fine, Greer. Your Indian has been drinking too much *tulapai,*" Taggat said.

*He's probably right,* thought Hoss, but the doubt lingered and to make certain, he sent Russ Pace, one of his punchers, to look over the dam and report back. Russ had been gone over two weeks, twice as long as necessary, and there was still no word from him. And Hoss was working himself into the mood his friends respected with silence, his enemies with watchful care—a mood sure to break into a rash of action.

The break came now and Hoss buckled on his guns, clapped on his hat and barged outside, barking orders to Gil Pastime, his T Cross V foreman. "Get Hung's kitchen fixed and keep that fool peeler out of it," he ordered. "Finish out them colts an' deliver 'em to the Sears outfit, on Camp Crick. Finish off the calf work with a fine tooth combin' of the manzaneets. An' look for me when you see me, mebby a week, mebbyso two. Saddle me that Rockin'chair Red."

Hoss rode along the Pioneer Trail, an old military road long unfit for wheeled transportation. He spent the night in Tonto City and next day, while passing Horse Mountain, caught the taint of dust. Presently, ahead of him, he sighted a lone rider reeling in the saddle. And he smiled, tolerant of wild, irresponsible cowboys who imbibe freely and too well.

He overtook the man rapidly. "Hang on, son! Nothin' ails you that a few days of hawss an' rope work won't cure."

The fellow turned and Hoss rode abreast, noting this was no beardless youth but a man somewhere near his own age, slim, and straight as an Apache lance. He caught the glare of bloodshot eyes and marked the high flush on gaunt cheekbones. This man was sick, not drunk. Then it happened. The rider snarled something unintelligible and jerked his Colt. His draw was perfection, his aim poor. Hoss' pony, mortally wounded, lunged into

the other horse and was caught by flying hoofs. It went down, threshing. Hoss, thrown, rolled and banged into a pine, cruelly stunned. His last conscious impression was of the gunman's horse bucking and hurling its rider to earth.

Hoss came out of it and sat up, rubbing his skull. The man who had answered friendliness with gun play lay where he had fallen. He was dead when Hoss knelt beside him—dead from a gangrenous belly wound, hidden by pieces of torn blanket. He had plainly suffered the torments of hell.

"Drunk!" Hoss scoffed at his error. "Dyin', feverish, and delirious. His shootin' was instinct—pure instinct. Pore feller."

HOSS searched the man's pockets, wondering who he was, and how he had come by his wound. In his pants was a Barlow, matches, a few loose coins. In one shirt pocket were tobacco and wheatstraws, in the other a wallet that proved a gold mine of information and surprise.

There were five love letters addressed to Mr. Jos. W. Giles, from an El Paso woman signing herself "Lou." Hoss counted five hundred dollars in crisp new greenbacks. A bill of sale for a blue-roan pony named Speck was signed by John Morse, proprietor of the Jicarilla Stables, in Alamogordo. And a blood-stained note read:

Smoker:—Enclosed $500, first payment on account. One thousand due, per agreement, upon receipt of obituaries of each of the following:

Benson Johns—Rocking J—Cave Creek.
Stiles Sherring—Twin S—McDowell Valley.
Val Cartmell—V Cross C—San Carlos.
Hoss Greer—T Cross V—Tres Alamos.

Money available when due General Delivery, Rimrock City. Promptness advisable but make dead sure. Don't let hurry defeat us. Cover all tracks before showing at Rimrock. In case of trouble notify me at once through can on pine—Wagonkeg Spring. I'll pay all costs of legal defense. Faithfully.

(Signed) Candy.

Hoss continued to kneel there, the note crushed in his fingers, a frosty, greenish flame in his pale eyes. Forgotten now was the fact that he was afoot. Forgotten also was his erstwhile pity for one who had suffered untold agonies. Giles! Smoker Giles! The name rang bells, loud and sharp, in his brain.

El Paso, Yuma, Denver, Santa Fe, Phoenix—the West had echoed his hireling killer's gun music. Hoss could recall six murders charged to him and four arrests. Twice he had successfully pleaded self-defense, twice he had broken jail. The bounties of four states and three territories still went unclaimed. Men still feared the Smoker, though the law shrugged after a five-year silence. Now Giles lay on a lonely trail, victim of a game he had so profitably played in the past.

Again Hoss read the names marked for slaughter, nettled that his own was last. Each name was that of a man identified with VIA. Only Bob Taggat's was missing. Why—if this was aggression against the Pool? Hoss toyed with the ugly implications, rejecting them finally as unjustified. Every big cowman has enemies. The bigger he is, the more he is hated. Taggat was not and never had been as big an operator as the four men named on the list.

Hoss' mind turned hotly to "Candy." He had never heard of one by that sweet, sugary handle. The future held that pleasure. He smoked thoughtfully, studying a dead face touched by the shadows of broken commandments. Smoker had paid, but the man buying his evil genius would live to remove out one or all of four important cowmen—unless somebody made it his business.

Now he rose, hawk-eyed, grim-lipped. He took Smoker's beautifully matched bone-grip six-shooters and his expensive 3 X beaver. He dragged the body to a nearby creek, and before caving dirt down upon it, studied it again. Smoker was about his own size and build, as well as about the same age.

"Was I to shave my mustache an' get my hair clipped higher," Hoss mused, "an' wear this hat an' tote these guns, Mister Candy might. . . . Hell, it's got its weak points, but it might work. I'll go see what's keeping Russ."

The burial complete, such as it was, Hoss took the saddle from his dead animal and cached it along with his own hat and gun in some thick brush. Then he started walking. A twenty-five mile walk should bring him to Hidden Creek, where he should be able to buy a pony. His spurs jingled as he trudged up the trail. Pines loomed ahead of him, and presently from the timber aisles came a soft, musical nicker.

"Speck!" cried Hoss, wheeling in surprise.

The blue roan came prancing, snorting, head up, nostrils flaring. It half circled, caught the wind. Maybe he smelled the sugar Hoss took from his vest pocket. Maybe he was a pet. Anyway, he tossed his fine head and minced close. Then, suddenly, he came with a rush and took the sugar. Hoss patted his arching neck, stirruped his foot and swung up silently, thanking the gods that looked after unhorsed cowmen. The roan leaped, as if expecting the spurs, but presently settled into an easy canter. Into Hoss' voice crept a note of pleasure.

"Sugar for you, Speck, an' Candy for me. Git along."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Killer's Legacy

AT THE settlement of Hidden Creek, Hoss found a barber who shaved off his mustache and cut his hair. There was no hotel, but he promoted supper and a bed in the home of the blacksmith, where he found a two-day-old Phoenix paper, brought over by a traveling drummer. On the front page was the announcement:

PROMINENT CAVE CREEK
CATTLEMAN DIES!
BENSON JOHNS VICTIM OF
UNKNOWN ASSASSIN!

CAVE CREEK, MAY 12th — Benson Johns, prominent rancher and father of Undersheriff Parley Johns, of Mesquite County, was shot and killed on the Rocking J Ranch today. According to Angelino Perez, a woodchopper, who witnessed the killing, Johns was confronted by a rider on a dark horse who shot him down without words. As he fell, Johns fired at his assailant, who doubled over his saddle and rode away. Perez hurried at once to the rancher's aid and was with him when he died. He believes the killer is seriously wounded and. . . . .

Hoss stumbled half-heartedly through the long column of speculation, all of it far off the mark. Nowhere was there any mention of Smoker Giles, who lay in a shallow grave, dead of Ben John's bullet. Hoss' grief for a friend was tempered by a grim satisfaction. Ben, a smiling, hale old-timer who loved peace and counted his friends by the hundreds, had come up in the cow business the hard way. He would ride twenty-five miles to steer clear of a fight, but when crowded he wouldn't give an inch. It was like him and his kind that, even in death, he could draw and tally the man who had shot him without a dog's chance. That was as it should be, but Ben's passing hit Hoss harder than he would have admitted. One by one, for one reason or another, the old-timers were being planted. And tomorrow—who knew—perhaps it would be Hoss' turn.

Hoss' urgency, purely defensive until now, became suddenly aggressive. He slept little that night, his mind a whirling maelstrom of plans that had no beginnings, no endings. He got away before dawn without breakfast. Riding hard, he made Rimrock City a little after noon.

He had not seen this town, which lay twenty-five miles south of the Volcano Creek Dam site, in two years, and his first impression was amazement at its growth and evident prosperity. It had grown up, its business section spreading from its original short main street to two adjoining thoroughfares. Its flimsy board buildings had given way to brick and stone. There was a bank, a two-story hotel and more than the usual quota of saloons and gambling halls, all busy, even at this hour. Hoss saw more men on the street than he had supposed ever congregated here, even after month-end pay days.

The town sat like a jewel in the cottonwood-studded setting of rock-rimmed Chinkapin. Long a supply point for numberless cow outfits, for years it had enjoyed no other patronage. But now, at first glance, Hoss had the answer to its new prosperity. Rugged, wool-shirted men scarred the walks with calked boots. Lumberjacks! Men stripping the high country of its big native pines. Hoss snorted. He had always been contemptuous of those who left chaos and destruction in the forests—sources of Arizona's precious water supplies.

With Speck's hoofs stirring Main Street dust, Hoss grew intent upon the Chinkapin Livery and Feed Barn, and the Chinese restaurant across the street. He was headed for the barn when a cry came from the south walk, fraught with urgency and joy. "Smoker! You old sonuvagun!"

Hoss' head swiveled. A woman stood there, hand outstretched, face exalted. Hoss's mind sifted the hazards of this complication, noting that she was booted and spurred, wearing soft doeskin skirt, plaid woolen shirt under a spotted calfskin vest, wide Stetson and bright yellow neck scarf. A gun rode at her waist and a loaded quirt was looped about her wrist.

Hoss had not worried about recognition, even while admitting such an ill possibility. Now here it was, the first thing, and by a woman. Yet it could not be dodged, if he was to accomplish his mission.

He tipped his hat, saw joy fade from her face, and reined to a rack. Lighting down, he tied Speck, watching the woman covertly. She stood straight and stiff, her face flintlike, her eyes critical. He moved toward her now, knowing he was in for it, and stepped onto the walk. He again lifted his hat. "You called me, ma'am?"

Scorn chilled her blue eyes as she regarded him silently. Her lips, plentifully rouged, were flattened as if she withheld some bitter tirade. Hoss waited, relaxed, interested. She was pleasingly youthful, though no artificial embellishment could make her actually young. Behind her were the years so dear to the woman of middle age. Probably beautiful once, she was now statuesque, sun-bronzed, healthy, her features a little coarsened by the years.

Range attire detracted nothing from her beautiful figure, and the hair peeking from under her Stetson showed no gray. *This one,* thought Hoss, *should be sheathed in silk.*

"I called Smoker," she said at last, very softly. "You're not him."

Hoss grinned. "Then why do men call me Smoker?"

Long-lashed eyes narrowed. "You favor him," she said, as if to herself. "You're wearing his guns, or their mates. And your pony—" her eyes shifted. "Speck!" The horse threw up its head, whickering softly.

Suddenly anger touched the woman's attractive features. "That *is* Smoker's horse! If I thought you—" She bit her lip, and her jeweled right hand fell to the grip of her pearl handled .38.

"That won't do, Lou." Hoss' voice chilled. "An' I'm too hungry to auger with a pretty woman. Let's go eat and talk things over."

At mention of the name she started, and Hoss knew he had guessed right. She nodded, grimly. "All right, lead out, Mister. You'd better make this good."

Side by side, they matched strides to the Chinese restaurant. And behind them the street underwent a change. Men who had heard her hail the rider clustered in small groups, drifting into the saloons. Magically, the name knifed through the town. "Smoker! Smoker Giles!" After five years, there was still sorcery in the name.

IN A CLOSED private booth, Lou watched Hoss eat hungrily, brooding silently, waiting. He forked in the last crumb of pie, washed it down with the final swallow of coffee, sighed, built a cigarette and bathed his lungs with smoke. "Now," he said. "About Smoker."

"Where is he?"

There could be no dissembling, so Hoss was brutal. "He's dead, Lou."

She came up, eyes blazing, reaching for her gun. Hoss caught her wrist, forced her down. "Set easy, ma'am. I never saw Smoker till day before yesterday. He was dyin', gut-shot. I buried him."

"And robbed him," she snapped.

"I taken his gun, hat, wallet an' pony—for a reason."

"What reason?"

"It happens him an' me was about the same size, age an' build. And I hoped by posin' as him, I could get a certain gent to show his hand. An' if that failed, to look you up in El Paso an' learn where an' who the man is."

"Candy?"

"Candy."

"That snake!" Her face contorted bitterly. "What do you want with him? Smoker's gun job? You aim to sell your gun to a rat whose dirty money undid my hopes and years of work to save that wild, reckless, restless fool?"

Hoss ground out his smoke, his face bleak. "How can I kill Candy, ma'am, if I can't find him?"

She straightened, gasping. "Why—why do you want to kill Candy?"

"To keep him from killing me. You see, I'm on his blood list. Besides, he's already hired the killin' of my good friend, Ben Johns. He's the man who did for Smoker." He passed Lou the clipping, watched her scan it.

She looked at him now and he saw anger and bitterness washed away by great welling tears. She laid her face on her arms and wept with terrible abandonment. Hoss' face softened. His weathered gun hand caressed her wavy brown hair and presently she quieted, dabbing her eyes with scented silk. "Why must a woman make such a fool of herself . . . over a man?" Her voice was choked.

"You loved him, Lou." Hoss stated it as a fact.

"Loved him?" She tried to smile. "I worshipped the big bum—have for years. It's shameless the way I've spread my traps for him. Sometimes I've thought I had him saddled an' bridled and hitched with my apron strings. But always I lost him—to guns. Days I've worried about him. Nights have been nightmares of fear he'd be caught, shot or hung. . . ."

"It's hell, Lou."

"I have tasted hell, Mister. But I'd've counted it cheap if I could have interested Smoker in settling down. Why couldn't I have spared him that lonely grave? I—I guess I wasn't the right woman."

"He wasn't the right man, Lou. You deserve better. You'll go back to El Paso?"

"I'll go nowhere except where I think I can find Candy . . . and settle with him."

"Then you don't know him?"

"I've no idea who he is. Smoker wrote he was riding gun for a man named Candy, in Rimrock City. Said he had big money in the bag and was coming to Paso soon to take me on a trip to Buenos Aires. So I came here to find Smoker before he got in too deep. You see, I've kept him out of circulation for five years; this was his first break and I knew his gun hand had slowed a lot. But I couldn't find any trace of him here. Or Candy either. I've talked to the biggest men in the town. They've never heard of anyone by that name. That don't make sense, does it?"

Hoss considered. "In some ways, it does. Whoever he is, he planned to kill four of the biggest cowmen in the territory—don't ask me why. Whatever his reason, it must up bin for big stakes. An' he'd have to keep well under cover. You an' me, Lou, our business is the same. You forget your yen to kill Candy. Guns damn a man an' they're sure not for women. Leave Candy to me. I'd admire to

have you act to'rds me as if I was Smoker. I've got a little trip to make now, but I'll be back in a couple days an' put up at the Territorial House. After that, we'll spread out our cards so that mebbyso Candy will take a look. Then. . . ."

She rose. "That's good. I'll play along, Mister—?"

"Just call me Smoker, ma'am, until Candy antes in. Then's time enough to tell you who I am—not that it makes any difference. By the way, you think Candy knows the Smoker by sight?"

"I don't know. But Smoker didn't know Candy; that I'm sure of. They dealt entirely by notes, left an' picked up in some secret place."

"Uh-huh." Hoss grinned, took her hand. "Glad you saved me a ride to El Paso, Lou. Keep yore chin up an' hang an' rattle till I get back."

She gave his fingers a mannish squeeze and there were tears in her eyes as she murmured: "Good-bye, and thanks." She turned away and left the booth. And Hoss, quitting the place to pay the check, watched her go to the street straight, proud, holding her courage only by a supreme effort. He knew that once she was alone the tears would break their dams to flood away her heartbreak.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Friendly Enemy

THE screen door of the restaurant banged behind Hoss and he stood a moment on the threshold, a habit fostered long ago by one who owed his life to some sixth sense warning of danger. And now he was warned. A singing silence held the town and the impact of hidden eyes was strong against him.

He looked up and down the street. It was almost deserted. The danger then, if indeed it was danger, lay crouched behind doors or windows, or perhaps lurked behind the high shelter of bleached false fronts. He took a last comprehensive look, missing nothing, then stepped briskly toward Speck, dozing at the hitch rack. He passed Carney's Saddlery, his boots echoing strangely in the silence and continued on past Stamford's General Store and Mack's Palace Saloon. He was veering off the walk when the twin doors of the drinking place flapped behind him and he whirled. A man stood before the entrance, crouched, his lips drawn back in a snarl, his cocked pistol leveled at Hoss' middle.

"All right, Smoker Giles!" His voice was a quavery falsetto. "You ain't got a chance. I'm a-goin' tuh trim yore wick. I'm givin' you a chance to drag yore iron an' that's more'n you ever done, you skunk! Crack yore smoke!"

He was a cowman, that was certain. And he was old—bowlegged, seamed weather-gnarled like some ancient oak. His hands were rope-scarred, calloused, and his gun was an old cap-and-ball piece. Hoss could have drawn and killed him where he stood, but a pang hit him, and he said:

"Hold on, old-timer. What you got against me? What'd I ever do to you?"

The oldster licked his chapped lips. "Nothin'. Nary a damned thing. But Harris Kinkade has made me hell a-plenty. He's hired every loose gun-fighter on the range an' turned 'em agin' all us nesters who wouldn't play his filthy game. Now he's hired you—the dirtiest killer of 'em all. I got no other out but to fight an' I'm startin' at the top an' workin' down—long as I last. Pull yore iron!"

"Harris Kinkade?" Hoss shook his head. "I don't know the gent, pardner. . . ."

"Don't lie, with Almighty God reachin' out fer yuh, Smoker!"

"There's a mistake somewheres, my friend. I tell yuh I never heard of him."

"Mebby you never did but him an' the Montezuma Lumber Company is all one. He bought up all the small outfits up Apache Peaks way an' has made hell fer all of us that wouldn't sell to him. Yestidday his gunhawks drilled lead through my winder an' takin' my Mirandy through the arm. That's declarin' war in my book, an' I'm declarin' right back by bracin' the Montezuma's worst gunhawk. Whip yore pistol!"

"Put up your lead-chucker," ordered Hoss. "If that's the deal, I'll go to war *with* yuh."

"You?" With a snort. "I don't want none of yore kind! I'm givin' you three to start mixin' smoke, you devil. One . . . two . . . "

Hoss knew he meant it. Talking time was past. The old fellow was a full rod away and Hoss leaped toward him, twisting, whipping out his Colt. The cap-and-ball gun roared and Hoss felt the sting of the bullet as it plucked at his coat and seared his side. Then he was on top of the whiskery patriarch, chopping with his gun barrel, denting the floppy black hat and the hard skull underneath. The old fire-eater fell to the walk without so much as a moan.

Hoss holstered his iron and caught up the frail, emaciated body. His roar struck through the hanging hush of the town. "Where's the sawbones here? Where's the medico's office?"

Men came boiling from buildings; someone shouted directions and a crowd tagged along as Hoss carried the unconscious man down the street, up an outside staircase and into the medico's office.

Hoss left the old man, who they told him was called Dismal Sims, and went down for a drink. He needed it. And while he stood at the bar of the Palace, chasing one whiskey

with another, the town marshal came in—a weaselly, pinched-faced man with a nervous jerking of the head. He ordered Sunnybrook and favored Hoss with a sour grin.

"Why the hell didn't you shoot the damned fool?" he asked. "Such mercy is surprisin' in a man of your reppitation."

"Ain't it?" grinned Hoss. "But I ain't yet started a clean-up of mossyhorns in the old man's home."

"He's a trouble-maker. If you don't kill him, somebody else is got the job to do. Rimrock treatin' you all right?"

"Your interest is touchin'," said Hoss. "Most lawmen I see are most interested in bounty."

The marshal winked. "Yo're safe here, my friend. Rimrock folks is plumb wise to what makes the clock tick here. If the's anything we can do, let us know."

"Thanks. How's Candy?"

"Candy?" The marshal's brows wrinkled in plainly honest perplexity. "What you mean?"

"Skip it," said Hoss, and drained his glass. The man wasn't a confidant of the one who had hired Smoker. "I'm goin' up an' see how Sims is gettin' along." He turned away and left the saloon.

He found Dismal Sims sitting in the doctor's office, a bandage on his split scalp, reeking with the smell of arnica. He still looked a little groggy and there was a sultry look in his eyes. "What you want?" he croaked.

"You live up in the Apache Peaks country, Sims?"

"Yes."

"How'd you get down here?"

"Buckboard, if it's any of yore business. I come down for supplies. I'm tied back of the Rimrock Merc, at the loadin' platform."

"I'm goin' thataway," said Hoss, "an' I'm ridin' with you. It's all right for him to go home, Doc?"

"Sure," said the medico. "He's not hurt. A day or two will see him good as new. He can take the bandage off tomorrow. My bill's five dollars; he claims he hasn't got it."

Hoss paid the charge and, scorning the old-timer's protest, got him by the arm and took him down the stairs. Half the town looked on as he led Sims to where Speck dozed, the lumberjacks muttering as a notorious gunman lost face by giving aid and comfort to their enemy.

HOSS tied Speck at the tailgate of the loaded buckboard, helped the wobbly oldster in and tooled the rig out of Rimrock, taking the north road according to Dismal's grudging directions. The wagon broncs were tough, shaggy mustangs, full of go and eager to get home. The miles flew beneath the singing wheels. An hour passed with Dismal sitting hunched and miserable and wordless. Then curiosity got the better of him.

"How-come," he asked, "that you didn't kill me, Giles? The great Smoker must be slippin' when he only slugs a man, then pays his doctor bill an' lugs him home."

Hoss laughed. "You crusty moss-horns never admit the's more'n one way: yours. an' the wrong way. I'll wise you up, but if you breathe it I'll make you wish I was Smoker."

Dismal started. "You—you ain't Smoker? But that woman—"

"Made your mistake. I'm Hoss Greer."

"Cripes! I've heard of you." Shedding his surprise, Dismal brooded. Then, bitterly: "I'm a fool, Greer—too old fer good sense. But it's plumb hell I bin through. . . ."

Hoss let him talk, listening to a pattern unchanged by time. Greed, covetousness, a reckless man sidestepping the law to bedevil those who blocked his selfish aims in defending their rights. Nester cowmen had died, yonder in the blue hills. Others had vanished. The remainder were licked, their cattle slow-elked to feed lumberjacks.

"Hoped tuh hang on," the old man finished gloomily, "but it's no use. Six months an' they'll be gone, but I—well, I spent my last simoleon at the Merc today. An' nary a beef left."

His lack of details left Hoss puzzled. "Why," he asked, "would Kinkade make war on you cowfolks? Lumber companies is usually good markets fer range-fattened beef. What started the trouble?"

"Buildin' that dam an' flume, Greer. Montezuma bought out all nesters except us who refused to sell. Then a feller name uh Acton fetched his gunhawks in to kick us around. I've fared better'n most, my place bein' below the works. . . ."

"What dam?"

"Volcano Crick. The's only one, thank God. Why?"

"Something stinks, Dismal. I bought out them nesters. I had the dam built, me an' my pardners of the VIA Pool. It had nothin' to do with timber—only summer range an' cattle water."

"No!" Dismal scratched his gray locks. "Then Montezuma has high-graded yore dam, Greer. I wondered why they guarded the trail so close; now I know. They couldn't have you gents nosin' up here till they'd finished loggin'."

"The flume?" asked Hoss. "Where does it go?"

"Northwest, some'ers, across the mountain face. Ten mile long, I hear."

Now Hoss understood those flash floods down Black House Creek. A broken flume mebby or . . . Suddenly he remembered that

Muggyon Timber had built a narrow gauge to Chileno Flats, four-five years ago. This might be them. He spoke aloud. "First I pay Brother Kinkade a visit."

"Easy Greer,"" came from Dismal. "You won't git within' rifle shot of him. But if you should, watch a man name uh Acton—he's Kinkade's gunboss."

"Free-Meal Acton." Hoss spoke the name, remembering the gunman he had shot it out with, burned down and sent to Yuma Pen. A human rattlesnake fanging his way through life, living up to a name earned by a fondness for mayhem. "Free-Meal Acton! He talks a good gun fight but ain't dangerous till he hugs a feller an' chaws him up some. Hope he's the best Kinkade kin offer."

Hoss stirred the flagging ponies up a grade an' around a bend, suddenly flushing stuffed, heavy-bodied buzzards. The air reeked of carrion. Hoss' eyes quested as he drew rein. He located the carcass, half hidden by brush, two legs stiffly elevated, the horse's belly ravaged by the stinkbirds. Sputtering curses, he set the brake and strode to the carrion. As he had feared, it was Russ Pace's blaze-faced black with four white stockings.

"It's only a dead horse, Greer," called Dismal, from the buckboard. "I drug it off the road?"

"Who shot it?" barked Hoss.

"Kinkade don't like strange riders pokin' along here."

"The rider? They get him too?"

Dismal blinked. "Yeah. I done all I could fer him."

Hoss' eyes were unsheathed blades. He drew out a flask, poured whiskey on the ground, traced a circle around it. "A sad little habit uh mine," he explained to the staring nester. "Honorin' a departed friend." He corked the flask and returned to the rig.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Taboo Range

DISMAL, suiting Hoss' glum silence, indicated a dim branch road. Hoss took it and whirled along the hill contour through moss-hung pines and the first hint of evening. Now and again Dismal chuckled and Hoss eyed him suspiciously. "What's funny?"

"Way you leaped at that dead horse, Greer. You knew the rider?"

"One uh my best punchers. Somebody'll pay plenty for this, believe me."

"I'd bet on that," said Dismal.

Now the buckboard whirled from the timber into the nester clearing. Beyond barn and corral stood a long, general purpose log building, and a log house banked with lean-to's. Hoss reined in at the barn and they got out to unharness. Dismal, much improved, helped. And, when the harness was hung and the ponies fed, he said: "Supper soon. Come up an' eat."

Hoss had hoped to make the dam before dark and return to Rimrock, but now decided he'd sleep here and, come morning, look up Kinkade for some cold turkey talk. Carrying Dismal's purchases, they went up to the house, where the nester pointed to a bench. "Soap, water, basin an' towel, Greer. Hop to it."

The door opened. A woman appeared—small, dejected, weary-faced, her left arm in a flour-sack sling. At sight of Dismal's bandages her jaw sagged. "Uriah! What in time happened?" And Hoss, pouring wash water, chuckled. Uriah! As bad or worse than Hosstetter—his own private curse.

Dismal fingered his bandage. "I let off steam in Rimrock, Mirandy," he said, sheepishly. "I outmatched myself an' all-around acted the damned fool. We won't say no more about it. Mirandy, this here's—er—Smoker Giles. He'll stay tuh supper."

She nodded. "It's pot luck, Mister Giles. Ain't much to cook around here. Paw, did yuh fetch bacon? With two exter mouths tuh feed—"

Dismal got it for her. Hoss sozzled in soapy water, wiped and combed his hair. His host followed suit, then jerked his head. "Come on in."

They went into the kitchen and Hoss noted the woman trying to peel spuds, with one hand almost useless. "I'd admire to help with that, ma'am."

She was pleased. "Right nice of yuh, Mister Giles, but I'm most finished. Go into the parlor an' set. Supper'll be on directly."

The parlor proved a combination room; in a bed in one corner, a man lay propped on pillows, pale, gaunt. Hoss stared at him, his nerves suddenly frozen. He cried: "Russ!", leaped to the bed and pumped the cowpuncher's hand. "I thought you was dead, Russ." He turned to the grinning nester. "What's the idea, Dismal? You said—"

"That he got it, Greer. He did—in the ribs. I said I done all I could, an' that's the truth. I wanted to see yore surprise when you met him. He's almost well."

"What happened?" growled Hoss.

Russ grimaced. "I rid to the dam like you ordered, boss, an' found the water low, thousands uh logs yarded on a flat below the dam, an' sweatin' crews rollin' 'em into a flume to God knows where. I went down to find who was operatin' an'—"

"They jumped him," put in Dismal. "It's a wonder he got that far."

"Not lumberjacks," explained Russ, "but tough hawss an' rope men, with tied guns. I thought they was hoorawin' me when they

ordered me down. I lit off an' one feller buffaloed me. It made me mad; I shot him. Then hell commenced. They shot an' I fired back, messin' up a few. Then I straddled my bronc an' dusted, takin' a slug. Whee-ew! They chased me, settin' me afoot six mile down. Except for Dismal; he sneaked me out through the brush, or they'd have had my hair."

After supper, they discussed it. Russ was for Hoss calling in cowhands and wiping out the toughs. Dismal vetoed that, asserting it would cost too many good lives. Kinkade, he said, was ready. Hoss expressed no opinion.

Next morning, after sleeping on it, his course seemed clear. "Tell me, Dismal," he said. "What else is doin' here that would call for a man hirin' Smoker Giles?"

"Nary a thing that I've heard of."

"Must uh heard something to decide Smoker was your meat. What was it?"

Dismal scowled. "A clerk in the Merc told me that Montezuma was hirin' Smoker to rub us remaining nesters out. We're friends an' I believed him; still do. My mistake was choosin' the wrong gunnie."

"I'm payin' Brother Kinkade a visit," announced Hoss, rising.

"They'll kill you, Greer."

"Don't, boss!" pleaded Russ. "Send fer Gil an' the boys. Time they arrive, I'll be up an' rearin'. Then we'll show them devils what hell's really like."

Hoss' eyes glittered. "You boys forget that I'll be visitin' Montezuma in my official capacity—as Smoker Giles. I don't believe they'll jump me. Everybody in Rimrock knows I come up here with Dismal yestiddy. If they was aimin' to cut loose a wolf on me, they'd a done it last night. They didn't, so look fer me about nightfall tonight. An' be fixed to set an extra plate; I may have company."

"Who now?" From Dismal.

"Harris Kinkade. If I can get that hombre out from under the noses of his gunhawks, I aim to pry a lot of valuable information outa him. Hang an' rattle till I see yuh. An' don't be ketched nappin'."

AS HE rode, Hoss Greer was filled with nagging doubts. He remembered the avid faces among the crowd on the streets of Rimrock, when he'd carried Dismal up to the medico's office. Lumberjacks, patently pleased that a supposedly notorious gunman had overcome a desperate old man. He remembered the marshal's words: "If you don't kill Sims somebody else'll have the job to do." And: "You're safe here, my friend. Folks here know what makes the clock tick in Rimrock."

It was as if the town had expected Smoker Giles, as if the killer had been counted upon to undertake certain business for Montezuma. Could that mean that Harris Kinkade was "Candy"? Reaching for answers, Hoss saw good reason why Montezuma could gain by the death of Johns and Sherring, Cartmell and Hoss himself. The prize was six priceless months. If during that period the Pool partners could be kept from the neighborhood of the dam, Montezuma would have completed the lumbering of their timber lands, have flumed the logs out and departed—with a fortune.

Once again, Hoss thought of Bob Taggat. The man lived not twenty-five miles east of Rimrock, within thirty-five miles of the dam. It was inconceivable that he had not known of the water steal, even if he was without knowledge of the murder conspiracy. Yet he had taken no step to let his partners know. Could it be that he had contributed to the deal—for a price? Would he plead ignorance when confronted with the facts?

"I'll see that gent," Hoss promised, grimly. "An' if he's guilty, I'll send him up if it's the last thing I do."

With no feeling of security as to just where and to what degree Smoker Giles fitted into the picture, Hoss avoided the road, keeping northward through brush and scrub timber where there was small danger from bushwhacker guards. He had his first glimpse of the dam and reservoir from the top of a bald mountain, a mile to the west.

It was as Russ Pace had reported. The upper end of the once-full reservoir was cracked and drying mud through which wound the still considerable flow of Volcano Creek. Water stood not over half way up the dam, which meant two-thirds of the water had been drawn off. In the canyon, at the foot of the dam, log aprons flared from the headgate into a flume which wound out of Volcano Creek, around ridge points and in and out of other lesser streamways.

Beyond, reaching up craggy slopes toward Apache Peaks Ridge, the scene throbbed with action. On a point, a donkey engine throbbed and puffed, its drum hauling in the braided steel cable as it dragged the logs into chutes and shunted them down to the "yard," on a bench below the dam. Here men swarmed like ants, their peavies busy as they rolled the sticks into the feeder chute, whence they went rumbling down into the flume, at an acute angle, and were swept away by the swift water draining from the dam.

Afar off, Hoss saw men working on another, lower-lying yard, and in several places twisting spirals of smoke denoted other "donkey" stands. Where there had been solid stands of great trees, when Hoss was here two years before, now he saw only scattered saplings and heaps of refuse. Pending the slow

process of natural reforestation, erosion would take its toll.

Grim-lipped, Hoss rode down the mountain, skirted the upper end of the reservoir and tipped upward into the logged over area. He came at length to the logging operations and passed crews at some distance, conscious that they paused to watch his passing.

Now the trails led downward and to the east and Hoss followed one and came presently to headquarters camp, pitched beside a spring creek. Here were long canvas streets flanking cook and mess tents, a smithy, bull team corrals, corded firewood, and towering haystacks. From the timber, Hoss spotted the sign OFFICE, and beside it the canvas commissary. Behind this, he tied Speck and walked to the "avenue" where scattered repair crews labored.

A weary character, sprawled under a pine near the office, stirred, stared, rubbed his eyes and bounced up with a short scattergun. He came at a run. "Where from hell did you spring from?"

"Plumb from the center, neighbor," said Hoss. "Why?"

The man paused before him, the shotgun bearing upon Hoss' middle. He was thin, sleazy, his calling indelibly stamped upon his hard visage. His was a recklessness born of strict orders and Hoss expected trouble.

The man snarled: "What you want here?"

"I'm lookin' for Harris Kinkade."

"Can't see him. Anything else?"

"Yes. Get that bird gun outa my briskit; it might go off."

"It will," promised the gunman, "if you don't high-tail. Who are yuh?"

"Smoker Giles—and I ain't used to mail-order gunnies standin' me up. Either turn that gun down or start prayin'—I don't care a damn which."

The fellow's face grayed. "Smoker Giles? Cripes! Maybe Kinkade will see you, feller. He's—"

"Come in, Smoker." The voice came from the office doorway. Hoss turned and saw the Montezuma boss inside the shadowed stoop—not at all as he had imagined him. He was big, with piercing black eyes, bold features, and fiery red hair and beard. His voice was richly resonant. Every line of his jutting jaw reflected his powerful personality; a Colt rode high on his right hip.

Hoss said: "So you're Kinkade," and stepped toward him. The man stood aside and Hoss entered. Close up, he saw Kinkade's trap-like mouth and was convinced that Kinkade was the strong-arm man for the real Montezuma boss—maybe Candy.

The lumberman called: "Mark, wake Acton and tell him his friend Smoker is here to see him." He turned back, grinning, and Hoss knew he was in for it—and in for it plenty!

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Blood on the Moon

"HEARD you were up this way," remarked Kinkade, "and I kinda bin wonderin' why." Hoss scowled. "Didn't Candy tell you? A fine thing, that is!"

"Candy?" Kinkade looked puzzled. "I don't understand, Smoker."

"Candy! Your boss! The big he-coon of Montezuma! I'm workin' for him, ain't I? I killed Johns, like he ordered, an' I ain't bin paid. What is this, a run-around?"

Kinkade smiled patronizingly. "Somebody's been hoorawing you, Smoker. Montezuma will be glad to use your guns, but it won't tread on toes that have prior claim on you. I read about the Johns killing, but you've still got two to go. When you're finished, I'll talk terms with you."

"My orders is to lay low while the smoke settles," said Hoss. "Rest here at your camp, make myself useful an' earn bonus money."

"Who gave you those orders?" Kinkade's eyes darkened with suspicion.

"Candy—the boss. And don't tell me that you don't know him. Who else but Montezuma would want Johns, Cartmell, Sherring an' Greer dead? An' while your answerin' that, how-come you knowed there was two yet to die. Who told you?"

Kinkade froze, listening, and Hoss heard bootsteps approaching. Free Meal Acton! Kinkade seized upon it. "Tom Acton told me," he said. "Montezuma's police chief."

"Yeah? Somebody else to pass the buck." Hoss sneered. "He better have the answers, Kinkade, 'cause I'm learnin' here and now who Candy is. Nobody holds out on the Smoker."

A heavy step sounded outside and the doorway filled with an ugly giant with wide shoulders and beefy chest. Free Meal hadn't changed much; he was a bit heavier, maybe, a trifle grayer. He stood on ponderous legs, squinting, scowling.

"You joshin'?" he snarled. "This ain't Smoker. It's Hoss Greer!"

A clock-tick. Then Kinkade barked: "A spy," and went for his gun.

Free Meal yelled: "Worse'n that, the snake! Here's for Yuma prison, Greer! Take it!"

His gun came from its sheath, as it had the day Hoss had beaten him. But Hoss, never flustered, always cool in a pinch, did not miss the swift plummeting of Harris Kinkade's hand, a smooth and perfect movement which was well ahead of the clumsier draw of Free Meal.

Hoss' Colt swept out, and he shot twice from the hip. Both slugs struck the Montezuma boss just above the belt buckle.

Knowing Kinkade was finished, Hoss shifted his attention to Free Meal Acton. Acton's pistol filled the room with smashing echoes, his bullet searing Hoss' side but in no way shaking him. He sensed rather than saw Acton swaying toward him; then Hoss' guns were leveled again. He dropped the hammer of one and his bullet shattered Acton's gunhand.

Hoss shouldered his man but the fellow was heavy-set and he kept erect, wrapping his left arm about Hoss and drawing him in, then tripping him with a quick hook of his big leg. They crashed to the floor together, Hoss underneath. Acton's teeth found Hoss' throat. . . .

Cursing, Hoss wrenched his gun arm free. His six-shooter went to Free Meal's temple, roared once. Free Meal stiffened, then sagged.

Hoss pushed against the man's chest, rolled the body off, and stood, heeding the voices of the rousing camp.

Then he went to Kinkade, who lay writhing and moaning on the floor in a widening pool of blood.

"Bad business, Kinkade," he said, "playin' Candy's cards. Tell me who he is an' I'll pay him off fer yuh."

The man's eyes opened, stared glassily up at Hoss. His lips moved. "Damn . . . damned slave driver. He had . . . it on me . . . forced . . . me to front . . . for him. Told him . . . it'd get me . . . killed. Made . . . me . . . go . . . through. He's . . . he's . . ." He struggled to speak a name, his face contorting terribly. Then a terrific paroxysm shook him. He coughed and clutched at Hoss' arm; then all strength left him and he fell back. . . .

Hoss rose. The men of the camp were coming toward the office, calling to Kinkade. The cowman drew his clasp knife, flipped it open and slashed the side of the tent farthest from the mob. He stepped through, hurrying between tents, and finally broke into a run. Someone spotted him and raised a shout. "There he goes!"

From the office came a raucous howl. "Acton an' Kinkade—daid! Somebody kilt 'em both!"

The crowd was in full cry now, legging it after Hoss, who caught up the reins of his horse, hit the saddle and dug in the spurs. Bullets whistled past him. Speck broke into a full gallop, heading for the timber. A slug burned him and he bucked a little, then settled down to a hard run.

Once among the pines, Hoss straightened and cast a look backward. A dozen horsemen were spurring after him. The man from Tres Alamos laughed brittlely. *They'll have a sweet time trying to catch Speck,* he thought.

But the guardians of the Montezuma were better mounted than he thought. And while he drew away, not once in the long ride around the reservoir was he able to lose them. It came down then to a matter of opening up enough of a lead so that he could get Russ and Mrs. Sims into the buckboard and on their way out. Then maybe he and Dismal could hold the renegades in check.

Hoss galloped into Dismal's dooryard, yelling, "Shake a laig! Git them broncs hooked to the wagon!"

HOSS explained to Dismal as they ran out to harness the ponies. But, while they worked fast, they no sooner had led the animals out than the first Montezuma men were slanting through the scattered timber toward them.

"Too late," groaned Dismal. "We'll have to fight 'em."

"Take these ponies an' mine inside!" barked Hoss. "I'll fetch another."

He caught Dismal's horse, heaved the saddle and bridle onto his shoulder. As he led the animal toward the house, the Montezuma gunmen had pulled up to talk things over. Hoss snapped a couple shots toward them, then Hoss was inside, the door barred behind him.

Old Lady Sims was complaining: "'Tis a cryin' shame that a body's clean kitchen must be all tracked up by horses. When will folks be able to live like Christians again? What will become of us?"

"Hush up, Maw," Dismal said. "Ye oughta give thanks we got a couple fightin' men tuh side us. Greer, you take the front, Russ'll hold the back. Maw kin take the west side where the' ain't much cover for 'em, an' I'll take the east. Good thing I got them thousan' rounds uh .30-40's when them sheep moved in, a couple year ago."

Russ was up and in his clothes, stooped a little, but enjoying the prospect after a spell in bed. He grinned as he pumped a shell into one of Dismal's long, octagonal-barreled .30-40's.

They took their places, their rifles stuck through gated loops Dismal had prepared for just such an emergency. From his vantage point, Hoss could see the gunmen gather, take their orders, then fan out to encircle the house. A high yell lifted to signal the opening of the attack and bullets slammed into the logs. And then the Montezuma men charged, their guns roaring, their bullets smashing through doors and windows.

Panes went jangling down in shards. Bullets buzzed like angry hornets. The house rocked as the guns of the defenders gave

smoky answer. Out there a horse went down. An instant later a rider threw his hands high and fell from his saddle. The line broke and the attack fizzled, the renegades scattering wildly. Dismal loosed a rebel yell and tension relaxed. Russ was exulting, having dropped the man who buffaloed him at the dam, or so he claimed.

"Save your celebratin'," curtly warned Hoss. "They'll be back—an' more dangerous because of the lesson we gave 'em."

"Let 'em come," gloated Russ.

The woman wept drearily and Dismal cursed. "Gotta git her away or she'll crack."

"A few weeks in the Rimrock hotel will be good for her," said Hoss.

"I'd like that," grunted Dismal. "She deserves it, but I can't afford—"

"She nursed Russ," snapped Hoss, "an' I pay my bills."

"Yonder they come!" yelped Russ. "Make your bullets good, men!"

The enemy, afoot now, crept up through the trees. A slug glanced off Russ' gun barrel, peppering his face with splinters. The defenders held fire, waiting, and the renegades gained courage. Across the clearing they burst, shooting, yelling like Apaches.

The house belched smoky death. On both sides, men fell. Mirandy screamed. On her side they charged with burning faggots. Hoss darted to her, jammed his carbine out through a loop. Dismal leaped to another gun port. Their weapons blazed. Two leading torchbearers jackknifed to earth. Another spun and crab-legged to cover. Two others dropped their fiery burdens and scattered like rabbits.

Four of the attackers lay dead. Two, maybe more, were wounded. Hoss heard the survivors talking it over. Moments later, when drumming hoofs heralded their withdrawal. Russ vented a cowboy's shrill yell of triumph.

"Gone for help," cautioned Hoss. "Russ, you help Mirandy to the buckboard. Dismal, help me span them broncs. Hurry!"

Dismal hushed Mirandy and got her started. Now she drove away, Russ beside her with gun ready. Hoss and Dismal rode behind, set for war.

They were not intercepted. Through evening shadows, they wheeled into Rimrock's Chinkapin Barn, Hoss arranging for stalls, Dismal taking Mirandy to the hotel. Afterward, at supper, Hoss told the two men to lie low in the hotel, at his expense.

"Might be trouble, boys. Montezuma's buzzin' like r'iled bees. Lie doggo together. Avoid any ruckus if you can. I won't be long."

"Gallivantin' off alone?" protested Russ. "Can't we help?"

"Not any. I'm seein' a man about enjoinin' Montezuma. An', incidentally, askin' the gent a few questions. Well, see you tomorrow."

He left them and rode from town as the first star appeared. "Taggat," he murmured, his voice cold as ice, "how much Montezuma mazuma you collected for keeping silent an' furnishin' VIA false reports?"

## CHAPTER SIX

### Candy Pull!

BARKING dogs rushed Hoss as he entered the BOB compound, at moonrise. Lights shone from the Spanish-type house and the tile-roof adobe bunkhouse. Somewhere a small engine pumped water and the air smelled of new-mown alfalfa. A fine, rich outfit.

The bunkhouse opened and cowboys drove off the dogs. Someone hollered: "Who is it?"

Hoss shed his pose. "Hoss Greer. Like to see Bob Taggat."

"Taggat?" A tall puncher strode up. "Hell, he's been gone for months."

"Gone?"

"Sold out. He's in Rimrock. Ask at his Palace Saloon."

It shook Hoss that Taggat had sold without notifying VIA. Pool shares were appurtenant to the land, not transferable. This meant some new owner was Hoss's partner. "Who owns BOB now?" he asked.

"Lou Tanner, mister. Since last winter."

"I know the lady," Hoss said. "Ask her if she'll see Greer, please."

The cowboy repeated Hoss' name, walked to the house. Hoss rode to the rack, saw the door open, heard Lou's call: "Come in, Mister Greer." She greeted him with a smile and a mannish grip. "Sit down. I didn't expect you."

"You didn't tell me you owned BOB, ma'am. That makes a difference. You're my pardner now, an' a pardner of Johns—killed by Smoker—an' of Cartmell an' Sherring. You're in the VIA Pool, part owner of valuable holdin's on the mountain."

"No, Greer. I signed them back to Taggat to cut down the cost of BOB."

"You can't, lady. By the articles, nobody can assign his VIA interest. If one tries, he forfeits his rights to his pardners. Didn't Taggat explain that?"

She looked embarrassed. "Really, I don't know. I—I was so sick with fear for Smoker and—oh, I didn't care! All I wanted was a nice place where he'd be interested, halfway busy and safe." Tears filled her round eyes. "Silly, wasn't it, thinking he'd be content with this?"

"Most men would be," replied Hoss gallantly. "A beautiful woman, a show ranch, horses, cattle, and an interest in VIA that will increase with the years."

"Thank you, Greer." She tried to smile. "But you said—"

"That you forfeit your VIA shares. That's the rule, but I'll see it's broken and that you get it back."

He talked on, finding words easy before this charming woman. He told her of the Montezuma steal, and explained that he had come out to see Taggat to institute injunction and damage proceedings. "The BOB owner will have to join us in the suit," he finished, "an' I sorta hope it's you, ma'am. You're not figurin' on sellin' now that Smoker is—?"

She shook her head vigorously. "No indeed! I told you why I bought BOB. I shall live my life out here, building it into a monument to my—my broken hopes."

Hoss said: "Anything new about Candy?"

"I've talked to many Rimrock men," she said. "Some have reasons for not knowing, but one has no reason at all. He's big. His finger is in most every profitable enterprise in Rimrock. When he tells me he never heard of Candy, I'm certain he lies."

"Who is he?" demanded Hoss. "Let me tackle him. I get pretty convincing at times, ma'am."

"That I know," she smiled. "You see, I've looked you up. No, I shall not give you this man's name until I see him again. I have an appointment for ten, tomorrow, in town. At that time I shall insist he give me the name of the man who lured Smoker into his grave, after five years of decent living." A bitter hardness swept her face. "If he still insists he doesn't know this Candy, I shall accuse him of being the man. . . ."

"An' when that happens, ma'am, you better have me with you."

Her lips pursed, thoughtfully. "All right, Greer, it's a deal. Meet me at the Rimrock Merc at a quarter to ten, tomorrow."

At the door, Hoss turned back. "I wonder," he grinned, "if the gent you're going to see is the one I'm narrowin' it down to?"

"I wonder," she smiled, and was almost gay as she waved him out with a jeweled hand.

ALL the way back to Rimrock, Hoss considered ways and means.

All was quiet at the Territorial House and Dismal and Russ had gone to bed.

Next morning, Hoss was up with the sun. He got a three-day-old paper and ate a leisurely breakfast at the Chink's place. When he paid his bill, he asked the Chinaman where he could find Bob Taggat, learning only that the man lived at the Territorial House. Grim-faced, Hoss hoofed back to the hotel where he found that Taggat maintained sumptuous

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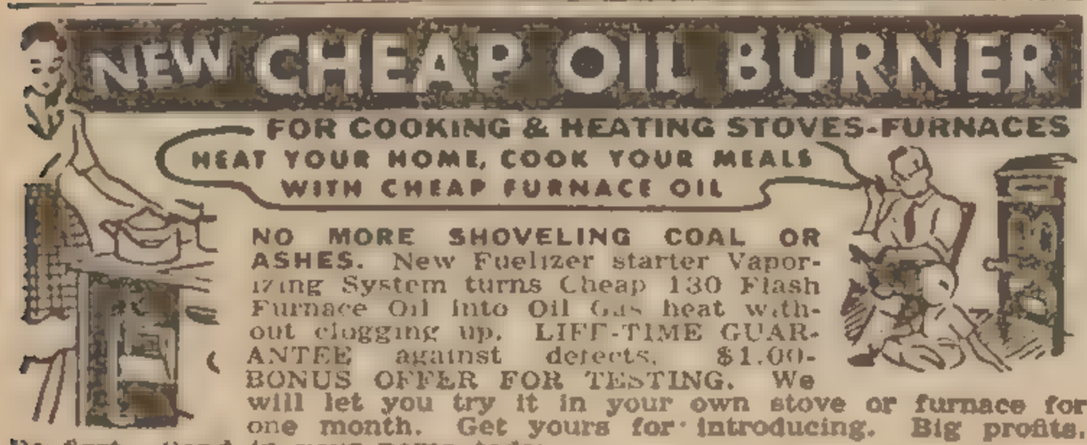
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apartments along one full side of the hotel's second floor. Hoss hitched his gunbelt and was preparing to visit his erstwhile partner when it occurred to him that it was not playing fair with Lou, whom he had promised to meet in the Merc.

Hoss looked at his watch. He had an hour and a half to wait. His glance strayed across the lobby. Four patrons loitered there, sitting well apart, each interested only in his own reading. Yet there was a sameness to that, not lost on this veteran of many gun wars. Each wore two guns. Each was hard-bitten, bored as a man is bored with waiting. They avoided conversation with one another—an overplayed effort to appear strangers. Hoss marked them well and turned toward the stairs to go to his room. At that moment Dismal and Russ came down.

He joined them, muttered: "My room," and led the way. And when they were locked in, he said: "Any trouble, boys?"

"No," said Russ. "It's too quiet."

"Cloudin' up to rain, Greer," said Dismal. "How's Mirandy?"

"Better, Greer. Like you suggested, I taken her to the store an' bought her some clothes. She's tickled as a boy with a new top." His eyes shadowed. "But she's worried about the place."

"If they burn you out, Dismal, I'll build you back. VIA will replace the stock Montezuma's stole. Now what about Rimrock?"

"See them four characters in the lobby?" asked Russ. "Well, at different times each one has paid a visit across the hall from us."

"Them gunnies ain't here fer their health," added Dismal.

"Know who they're a-visitin', boss?" asked Russ.

"I got my own idees, son."

"It's Taggat—the gent who brung that pool idee to the V Cross T. Didn't he tell you he was a cowman? Hell, he's a gambler an' saloonman, an' cleanin' up on these dumb lumberjacks! He owns the Palace Saloon, the Chinkapin Stables, this hotel an' God knows what else. An' these gun-slingers seem to be his bodyguard."

The youngster was hot under the collar and Hoss said: "Easy, Russ. Why shouldn't they be interested? Word must uh come down. Far as they know, you two might have killed Kinkade an' Acton."

"Kinkade an' Acton?" Dismal's jaw dropped. "Matthew, Mark, Luke an' John, did you kill them two fellers, Greer?"

"Smoker Giles killed 'em, boys. Let it rest thataway. Take my advice an' stay close to your rooms today. Get your breakfast an' then sit tight till you hear from me."

They went out and Hoss stretched out on the bed, relaxed in body and mind.

Presently he roused, looked at his watch.

Lou was waiting for him in the Merc, looking fresh, determined and a little grim in the get-up he had first seen her in. As she talked, she nervously fondled the butt of the .38 at her belt. "I should have told you the man's name last night," she apologized. "I was afraid you'd cheat me if I did."

"Look," Hoss scolded her. "You're figgerin' on payin' that skunk off for doin' what he done to Smoker. Forget that. Say what you got to say, check the bet to him an' if he calls for a show-down, I'll raise him. It's five of ten. You better get started."

"Room 205, Territorial House," she murmured, stepped past him and went to the street with a strong, swinging stride. Room 205 was Tom Taggat's suite entrance.

Hoss followed. As he entered the lobby, where the odor of her lilac perfume still lingered, Hoss saw the four gunmen shift their glances from the stairhead to him.

HOSS climbed the stairs slowly, reached 205. Lou had wasted no time. He heard her say: ". . . and the idea that you, the most important man in Rimrock, never heard of this Candy is ridiculous. It can only mean one thing, Taggat. *You* are Candy!"

Taggat's scornful laugh sounded. "Strictly off the record, girlie," he said, "you're right. I am Candy. The Candy Kid, on the List of Fugitives, in Texas. But you'll not live to tell it. I've been sorry ever since I sold you the BOB. With you out of the way and a forged deed, I'll have it again. Now. . . ."

"What are you doing?" Lou's voice came, muffled. "Take your hands off me, or—"

Hoss turned the knob softly and stepped in, flipping the door closed behind him. "Turn her loose," he told the man struggling with Lou. "This is the payoff, Candy."

Taggat flung the woman from him and stood there glaring at Hoss—a handsome man, straight, strong, clean-limbed. He held Lou's revolver.

"You fool!" he snapped. "What is this, a double-cross, Smoker? She said you were dead. I staked you to chips, my friend, and now you're fixing to lose them for us both."

"I've sat in many a crooked deal, Taggat, without losin' chips," replied Hoss. "Lou told you the truth; Smoker *is* dead. I'm Hoss Greer—remember me? And before I kill you, I want you to know that Kinkade an' Free Meal never knew—just who killed 'em. You talk about a double-cross. I've nosed out all your crooked dealing an' I'm holdin' you for payment. Drop that gun!"

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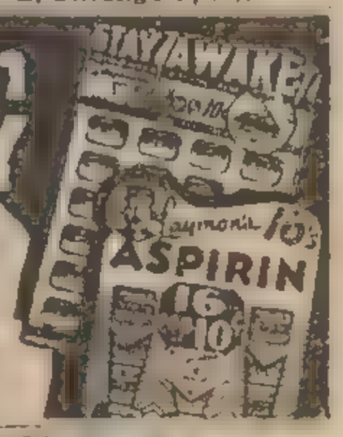


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Taggat's face paled. "You got plenty of confidence, Greer, I'll say that."

"God an' a good six-shooter—it's in them I put my confidence, Taggat. Cut loose!"

Lou, near the wall, gasped. "Hoss!"

The faint squeak of a hinge struck Hoss' ear. He whirled, drawing. He had a blurred impression. He saw Taggat's gun lift, saw the flash of the descending gun barrel behind him. He had to do two things at once and he did neither of them well, yet well enough to save his skin. He flipped a shot at Taggat and hurled himself shoulder-on at the man in the doorway. He missed Taggat, staggered Taggat's gunman. A gun barrel thudded against his skull, staggering him. He still had enough strength to press his weapon against his assailant's belly and let go.

The gunman was down now and Hoss was stumbling around out in the hall. He saw three gunmen racing down the corridor. Simultaneously he saw Russ and Dismal pour into the hall, and heard Russ cry: "No you don't, you damned snakes!" Then came the thunder of guns filling the hall and Hoss heard Lou scream and remembered Taggat.

He spun about and reeled into the room. Lou lay there, her forehead bleeding from a bullet scratch. Taggat was not in sight, but Hoss heard him clumping across the wooden awning out front. The man had dropped to the ground when Hoss reached the window.

Leaving Lou, Hoss ran into the hall. Dismal had the gunmen on the run.

Russ yelled: "Where you going?"

Hoss answered bitterly: "After Taggat! I let him get away. Stay here."

"Like hell! I'm with you!"

"Me too," cried Dismal.

They took the stair together, two at a time, raced across the lobby and so reached the street. The walks were deserted. They stood before the hotel, hesitating. Then, from between two buildings, stepped Taggat and his three gunmen.

"My deal, Greer!" Taggat called out.

"Your empire's busted in the middle, Taggat," called back Hoss. "An' you won't live to see it mopped up."

"I'll see you die first!"

HE CAME striding swiftly forward, his three gunmen matching his pace, two on his left, one on his right. Hoss started simultaneously, his two companions abreast. Dismal grinned toothlessly, his pistol dangling. Russ Pace whistled a tuneless dirge. Shoulder to shoulder, they moved forward.

Ninety yards . . . eighty yards . . . seventy! Taggat's gray face became a thing of hard lines, all pulling toward his strained mouth.

The old cowman saw the quick down-thrust of Taggat's right hand. Hoss' gun was in its sheath, and then it was out. The fire of seven guns shattered the morning air.

Taggat's arm dropped; the gun fell from his nerveless fingers and Taggat tipped forward. Two of his gunmen were down. Dismal was down. Russ chased after the fleeing survivor, cursing him, daring him to finish it.

Slowly, Hoss walked over to where Taggat lay. Softly, he called, "Taggat!"

But Taggat didn't answer. He would never answer, in this world. Satisfied, Hoss turned and walked back. He knelt beside Dismal. "Hurt bad, old-timer?"

"Me? Hell no! Got it through my laig meat. Made me dizzy an' I fainted."

Hoss chuckled. Rawhide an' barb wire, this one. He stood up. Mirandy was racing along the walk toward him, her eyes on her man. "Uriah! Land sakes, Uriah! I seen it all an' I'm proud of yuh, paw."

Hoss said: "Uriah," and laughed to himself as he moved toward the hotel. In him was a strange eagerness to see Lou again . . . and comfort her. Russ came hurrying up to fall in step with him, his breathing gusty from running. "The snake outrun me, boss."

"Let him go," said Hoss. "He'll carry the word to the mountain. Then that crew up there will raise a dust an' save us the trouble uh killin' 'em."

"We goin' up yonder?" asked the cowboy eagerly. "We goin' gunnin' for them skunks?"

"Gunnin's over, Russ. What lumberjacks is in town today proved they don't care to play Taggat's cards. They'll be workin' for VIA now, an' we got six months to make up Montezuma's damage to us an' to Dismal. I'm goin' for a talk with my new pardner."

And he was smiling as he strode swiftly toward the Territorial House.

THE END


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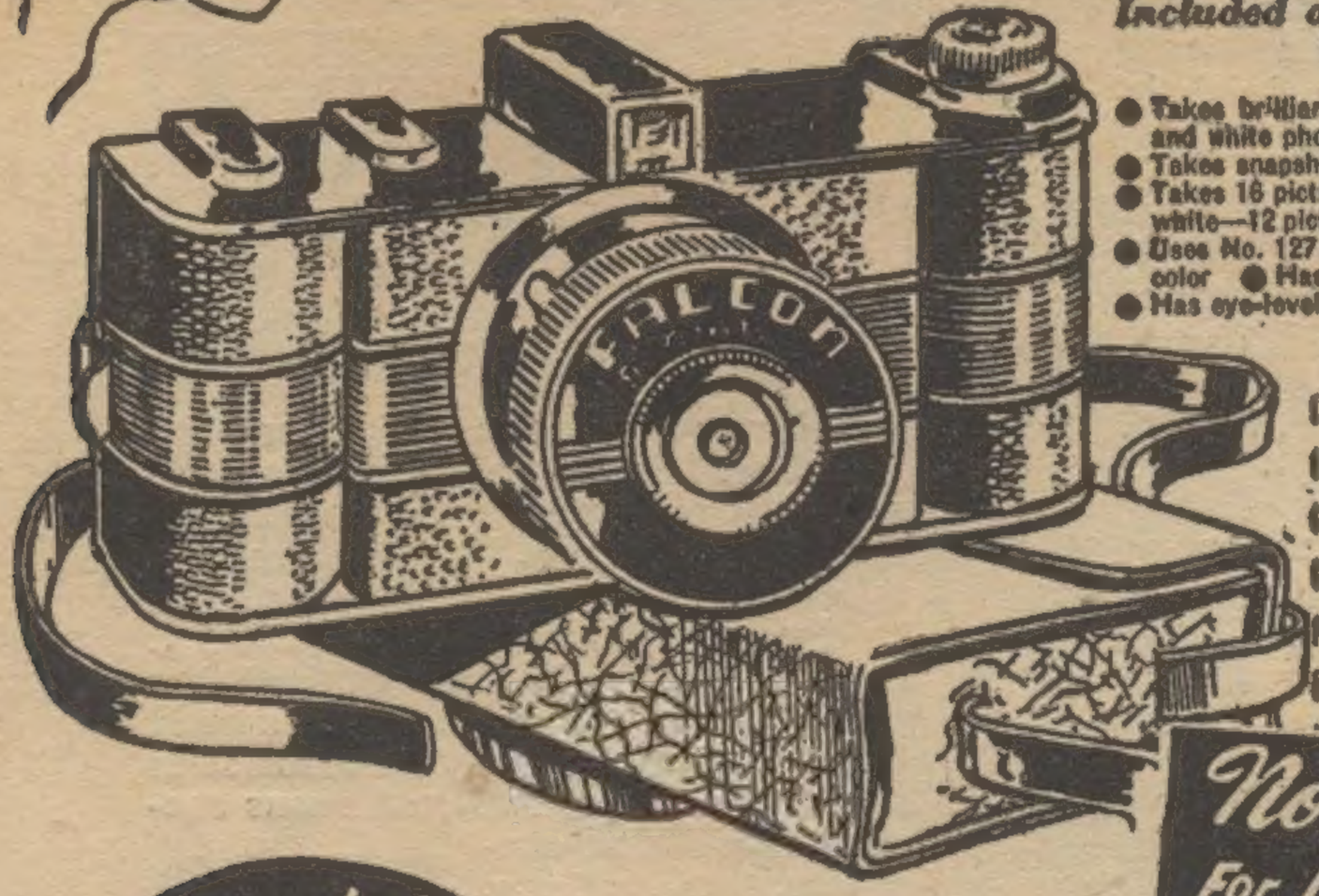


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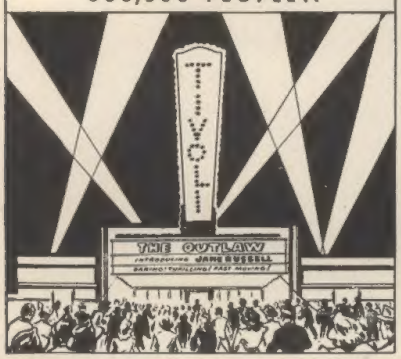

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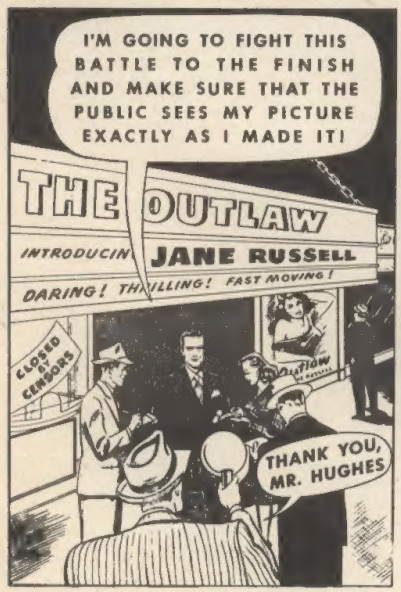
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